

# The Tormented Duke and his Widow

A Steamy Regency Romance

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Olivia T. Bennet



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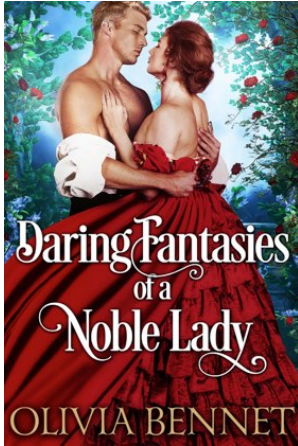
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Also by Olivia T. Bennet  
About the Author

## A Thank You Gift

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***He is cold, pained and cruel...***

As the second Duke, Neville Bennet has only time for duty and command. After losing his wife twenty years ago, images of her torment his mind, leaving him a former shell of himself. But now, he cares about one thing and one thing only: his daughter and her future. Until a woman—no, an *enchantress*, steals his heart...

***She is kind, understanding and hurt...***

Julia Smith, an older but still just as beautiful woman, does everything in her power to protect her son from the world's cruelties. Focused on giving him the childhood she never had—hers was ridden with abuse, after all—her days are spent spoiling him beyond belief. Until the day, a mysterious man shakes her world and awakens the passion she wants—no, *needs*, to keep hidden.

***Only together can they heal...***

Julia and Neville make an unlikely agreement: they will connect their Houses by wedding their children.

Until the unforeseen happens: they fall unexpectedly and shamelessly in love with each other.

So why, oh why, are they so keen on denying it, despite their secret meetings? And how, oh how, will Julia manage to break Neville's stone walls?



## Chapter 1

Neville Bennet, the Duke of Edinbran, strode through the halls of Edinbran Castle. He was a proud man, a man of tradition and tact. His hair may have been greying, and there were a few wrinkles on his face, especially around the eyes, but he still had his looks, and for a man of fifty-two, his body looked twenty years younger.

That could have been because of all the sport he had played as a younger man or the fencing that he still enjoyed, or perhaps nature was just kind to him. But Neville did not care about all of that. His looks were irrelevant when it came to what was truly important, and that was his daughter, his only child, Sophia.

“Beautiful,” whispered Neville as he caught sight of Sophia. The doors at the end of the long hallway were sitting open, and women buzzed around his daughter like bees to a flower. The dress had been ordered months ago, crafted from the finest silk from overseas, and there were some minor alterations to be made now that it had been fitted.

Sophia turned as her father walked toward the room, and she smiled at him. Her mother was in that smile. She had inherited much from her, and it was a smile that reminded him most of his late wife. It was a smile that could light up a room and one that brought joy to those around.

“Father, what do you think?” asked Sophia as Neville entered the room. The dressmaker was knelt by the hem of the dress, adding some pins to hold the fabric so that she could add the finishing touches once the dress was off.

“Exquisite,” stated Neville. “I do not think that England has seen such

beauty before and nor will it again.”

“Your Grace,” said the dressmaker, standing and curtsying to Neville. “The dress shall be ready for the ball.”

Neville nodded and took in his daughter. The way she resembled Gloria was uncanny, and he had to take a moment before he spoke again. “Did I ever tell you about the first time I met your mother?” he asked.

“You have, but please tell it again,” Sophia said, twisting to the side so that the dressmaker could carry on her work. The dressmaker’s assistant stood patiently waiting for instruction, and Sophia’s lady’s maid stood close to the door should she be needed. The butler stood close too; a tray of sandwiches and tea sat on the small table by the wall. The maid and butler stood still as stone, neutral expressions on their faces.

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” said Neville. “She wore a dress much like this, though the fabric was not silk. I would not be able to tell you what the fabric was, but my daughter deserves the very best.”

“Father, the material of the dress does not matter, I am sure. Please skip to the part where you fell in love with Mother.”

“I had heard people talk about love at first sight,” continued Neville, “but I never believed it. How can you tell that you love someone before you marry them? That all changed with your mother. When she walked into the room, there was no other woman in the world who could measure up. I knew from that moment that I would marry her.”

“And you did,” said Sophia.

The dressmaker picked up a needle and thread and stitched the bottom of the hem, holding it temporarily.

“Yes, I did.” Neville looked toward the window and out into the grounds—the plants were flowering, and the apple trees were about

bursting with fruit.

“Look at you, Sophia.” Neville looked up and down the elegant dress, shaking his head slightly when he caught her eye again. “There is no man in this country or beyond who will be able to resist such stunning beauty. And”—Neville raised a finger—“that is where I come in.”

“Father,” said Sophia with a roll of her eyes.

“No man will be able to resist, but that does not mean that just any man shall be able to claim my daughter.”

“I know that you mean well,” said Sophia.

“Now, let us talk of it no more and focus on getting you ready for the ball. There will be many men there for you to choose from. The Duke of Parvey will be there with his two sons.”

“They are both very handsome,” said Sophia.

“And Baron Anderton is bringing his nephew.”

“Another fine man, from what I hear.”

“You already know of Mr. Barley.”

“He has a silver tongue, but there is kindness in his eyes.”

“For goodness sake, Sophia. This is exactly why you need me to help choose a man for you. I do believe that if it was left up to you, you would not be able to choose.”

“I do not care who I marry, as long as they are a good man and treat me well.”

“It is very important who you marry, Sophia. We are talking about a lifelong commitment. When you marry someone, that person needs to be chosen carefully. A man needs to do more than only treat a woman

well. He must be able to provide for her, be upstanding, help his community, and better this world.”

“I am sure that there are many men who can do that,” said Sophia.

“Lady Sophia, I am done with the alterations for now,” said the dressmaker, standing back up.

“I do not believe that is true,” said Neville. “There is a man in this world who is perfect for you, and you need to find that man. I knew it when I saw your mother, and I will know it when I see the man for you. This is not a decision to be taken lightly. There are no second chances.”

“What would Mother say if she were still here today? Would she want you to skulk around these halls with no one in your life?” asked Sophia, stepping down from the small platform that she was on. “Would she not want you to be happy?”

“I am happy,” said Neville with no emotion. “And I have you.”

“That is not what I mean, and you know it.”

“I will not betray your mother like that,” said Neville.

“It is not betraying her. She passed nearly twenty years ago, and she would want you to move on. It is...oh, forget it, Father. I have to change out of this dress before my tears stain it.”

“You will understand when you meet the right person,” said Neville. He turned away from his daughter and left the room as she walked with her lady’s maid to go to the other room and get out of the dress. Normally, he would have walked in the gardens on an afternoon like this, but he did not feel like doing that today. Instead, he ascended the stairs and went to his study.

There were some papers on the desk, some land transfers that he was to sign, but he could not focus on them. He sat down on the cushioned

teak chair and pushed the papers to the side of the desk. He fished some blank paper from the drawer, dipped his pen in ink. He had put off for far too long replying to the letter his uncle had sent from Scotland, and he was curious to hear how life was up North and why the man had not yet returned to the majesty of England. But, no matter how hard he tried, no words came to him.

Neville put the pen back in the holder and sighed. The conversation with his daughter played again and again in his mind. If his wife were still here, she would know what to do. Opening the drawer, he found the old envelope and placed it on the desk. Inside was a small portrait, the colors slightly faded, but not as much as they would have been had they been subjected to light for the past twenty years.

The lady in the painting was young, and Neville ran his fingers over the textured paint. She was smiling forever in the portrait, as she did in life. Even in death, she seemed so full of life, and Neville found a slight upturn at the corner of his lips. He brought the picture up and kissed it delicately. She was taken from him far too soon.

Neville carefully placed the portrait back in the envelope. It was painted not long after they were married, and it captured her youthful exuberance. He loved her still, even after all these years, and he knew that no woman could ever replace her. He closed the drawer and went back to the papers in front of him.

It was too late for an old man like him, but Sophia was in her prime. He would make sure that she married well if it was the last thing that he did.

## Chapter 2

“*H*is Grace, the Duke of Edinbran, and his daughter, Lady Sophia!”

The shout rang out across the ballroom, and everyone turned to greet Neville and Sophia as they entered. Sophia gripped tightly to Neville’s arm as he guided her through the people, introducing her to many of them. There were many young ladies scattered around the room, and that meant numerous fine dresses. Neville was glad that he had imported the finest silk from France to create something more spectacular for his daughter.

First impressions were everything, and he was not going to let anyone stand in the way of finding the perfect man for his daughter. Even though they had been to numerous balls over the past year, he was sure that they were going to find the perfect man tonight. Sophia had protested on the way to the manor, telling him that she was growing bored of all the courtship and ritual, but Neville knew how important this was.

He had found true love with Gloria, and he wanted that for Sophia. She would understand when she was married, and she would thank him, he was sure.

“Your Grace,” said Duke Parvey, approaching with his two sons. He was a stout man with a thick mustache, two things that his boys had not inherited from him. “Please allow me to introduce my sons, Edward and Chester.”

Edward was the older of the two, and he stepped forward first. Along with being older by a year, he was an inch taller than his brother with wide shoulders and a rugged face. “Your Grace,” he said, shaking



Neville's hand but only looking at Sophia.

Already, he had gotten off on the wrong foot by not showing respect in the greeting. Still, Neville introduced his daughter, and she was all smiles during the introduction. Chester was introduced next, slightly shorter and less muscular than his brother but with a more defined jawline and a flawless complexion. When he shook hands with Neville, his palm was sweaty, and the Duke of Edinbran found himself discreetly wiping his hand on his handkerchief when no one was looking.

Sophia, however, was enamored by both men, and they filled her dance card for the two dances of the evening. When they left to find refreshments, leaving him alone with Sophia, Neville wanted to tell his daughter that they were not the right men for her, but this was not the place, and she had already agreed to dance with them.

Neville spotted them from across the room, and the two brothers were engaged in whispered conversation while often glancing at Sophia with smiles on their faces. He did not trust them, and they certainly did not act like gentlemen, in his opinion. Perhaps he would talk later to Duke Parvey in private.

Soon after, Neville watched as Edward approached to lead his daughter to the dance floor. Neville watched them walk off, and he turned to walk around the dance floor to the other side of the room, where there were some gentlemen to talk with. There was fighting in the colonies, and he wanted to know more. Neville took a final glance behind him to locate his daughter, and when he turned around, he collided with a woman, knocking over her glass of punch.

"Excuse me, madam," said Neville in slight shock. He recovered quickly and was happy to see that the drink had not spilled on the woman's dress. He had not met the lady before and was sure that she was not one of the elites, but she looked well to do and took obvious care in her appearance.

"That is quite all right," she responded. She placed her glass down on

the table and took a napkin to try to dab at the spot on the floor.

“Please, allow me to accompany you to refill your glass. I can have someone take care of that.” Neville looked across the room, and he could see a butler already on his way. He nodded to the man and took the older woman by the arm, guiding her toward the refreshments. The woman wiped her hands with the napkin and allowed herself to be led.

“I must apologize again,” said Neville when they got to the punch. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Neville Bennet.”

“Bennet,” said the older woman. “That name is familiar. My gosh, you are the Duke of Edinbran.”

“The very same.”

“Thank you for taking care of me, Your Grace. I know you by reputation. Please, do not let me stop you from getting to where you were going.”

“It was a foolish errand. I only wanted to know about the war in the colonies, but the news is always the same. The fighting continues on and on with no sign of both sides finding peace.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said the woman. “My husband...my late husband, fought in the war. I...sorry, you do not need to hear my life story.” She looked around for something, and Neville quickly took out his handkerchief and handed it to her so that she could dab her eyes. He had a feeling that he knew exactly how she felt.

“Please, allow me to stay with you a little longer.” Neville knew the pain of the loss, and he had genuine sympathy for the woman. “I do not even know your name.”

“Pardon me again,” she said. “Straight into my past before even introducing myself. I am Julia Smith.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Julia.” Neville held out his hand, and Julia took it briefly.

“And a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace,” said Julia, dabbing at her eyes one more time before handing back the handkerchief.

Neville wanted to ask more about her late husband. He was fascinated by war, but he knew better than to stir old feelings. He wanted to tell her that his wife had also passed but, instead, he asked, “Are you here alone?”

“My goodness, no,” said Julia. “My son is here with me. I fear that I will never find him a wife.”

Neville smiled a wry smile. “I know exactly what you mean. I have the same fear for my daughter. Sophia would likely marry the first man who proposed if I were not there to step in. I will only settle for the very best for my daughter.”

“Maximilian is quite the opposite,” said Julia. “I fear that he does not want to marry at all. I had to convince him to ask a lady to dance this evening, and even then, he only managed to fill one slot on a card. What do I do if my son never takes a wife.” Julia looked down at the ground quickly. “I must apologize again. I was in your way, and now I am laying all of my problems on you. You must ignore what I am saying.”

“Do not apologize for that,” said Neville. “Besides, it was I who ran into you. As a father, I know what you are going through. We only want the best for our children. I can see that you are a fine mother who cares about your son.”

Julia looked down at the ground with a small smile on her face. No one spoke until the first dance stopped, and the men and women looked for their next partners.

“You must meet my son,” said Julia, looking back up again. Neville looked toward the young man approaching, and he could see some

resemblance between the two, especially around the eyes. They shared freckles around the nose too, enough that with a careful glance, they could be seen as mother and son.

“Maximilian, may I introduce the Duke of Edinbran,” said Julia when the young man arrived at her side.

“Your Grace,” said Maximilian, offering his hand. Neville noticed that the man shook his hand firmly and with confidence. “It is a pleasure to meet you,” continued Maximilian.

“Thank you,” said Neville. “What is it you do, Maximilian?”

“My mother would have me be a scholar if she had her way,” said Maximilian with a smile. She would like me to go into medicine, which is a fine profession, I have to admit, but I would like to follow in my father’s footsteps. He perished in the French Revolutionary War, and he died defending what he believed in. I can think of nothing finer. Of course, I would like to come home from defending my country.”

Maximilian smiled, and Neville almost chuckled and may have if he did not see Julia put a hand on her son’s arm. When her eyes met his, he saw the sadness there. This poor woman only had her son left in the world, and that put an idea into his head.

“With your father gone, it must be hard to look after your mother, especially with your studies. You are not yet signed up for the army, so what is it that you do for money?”

“An astute question,” said Maximilian with a smile. “Before my father passed, he acquired land in England. He was able to loan out some of the land to farmers, and the rest is being mined. With what profit that turned, I was able to invest in gold mining overseas. We now own a gold mine, and while we have not yet struck a rich vein of gold, the mine does produce a modest profit year on year. As soon as we have saved enough, I have a friend who needs investment in his shipping company, shipping goods back and forth to the colonies.”

“You sound like a young man who has a good head on his shoulders,” said Neville, sizing the young man up. He looked to be around twenty-four or twenty-five, and he had already made good business decisions. His daughter was currently dancing with two brothers who lived off their father’s money, and he was not sure that they had worked a day in their life.

“I would like you to meet my daughter,” said Neville.

Maximilian looked at his mother quickly before turning his attention back to Neville.

“Do not worry,” said Neville. “Your mother is not conspiring to find you a wife. I merely bumped into her by accident, and I met you because of that. I think you are a fine young man, and I would like you to meet my daughter. The dance is almost over, and she will be returning soon.”

“I...”

“Maximilian, I do not think it polite to refuse the Duke,” said Julia.

“Of course not,” said Maximilian. “I was not about to suggest such a thing. I would be more than happy to meet your daughter, Your Grace.”

“Very well,” said Neville. He had a genuine smile on his face for the first time in as long as he could remember. When his daughter approached moments later, she had a puzzled look on her face at her father’s smile, and then a look of realization when her eyes turned to the young man beside him.

Neville watched Maximilian closely and could see the man’s eyes light up when Sophia approached. His daughter was a vision, and she looked especially resplendent in the flicker of the candles and lanterns dotted around the room.

“My dear,” said Neville. “May I introduce Maximilian Smith and his

mother, Lady Julia. My daughter, Lady Sophia.”

“It is a pleasure,” said Sophia, her eyes lingering on Maximilian.

Neville had hoped to find someone for his daughter this evening, and fate had dabbled once again. By not looking where he was going, it had been orchestrated for his daughter to meet the most refined man at the ball. And, with how little Maximilian was chasing his own marriage, there would be little competition. Maximilian had everything that Neville was looking for in a future son-in-law. He was sure of it. He had finally found a husband for his daughter.

## Chapter 3

“*F*ather, you have never invited a gentleman over for dinner before,” said Sophia.

“This young man is not like any I have met before,” said Neville. I have kept correspondence with his mother, and I believe that this will be a favorable match for you.

“I must admit that Maximilian is very handsome, and I did enjoy talking to him at the ball. I hope that you are right, Father. I am done with all of these social occasions. I feel as if I have to put on an act, and I cannot be myself.”

“You should always be yourself,” said Neville.

“That is not always true,” said Sophia. “Was Mother the same after you married her as she was before?”

“She was more amazing than I thought,” said Neville.

“Then I have a lot to live up to. I do not believe that everyone can have what you and Mother had. I can only dream that I will find love too.”

“You shall,” said Neville. “I am sure of it.”

The two walked through the gardens of Edinbran Castle, the scent of tart apples in the air. The season was fast approaching when they would be harvested—some to be turned into cider, others into pies and jellies. It was a fine time of year to be living in the Castle.



“We should go back. They will be arriving soon, and I want to make sure that the staff has everything ready,” said Neville.

“You sound nervous,” said Sophia with a smile.

“I am no such thing,” stammered Neville. “This is very important for me. For you, Sophia. A good first impression is key.”

“I know, Father,” said Sophia. “I will do the best that I can.”

“And your best is wonderful,” said Neville. “I can already tell that Maximilian has taken a liking to you. That will soon grow into love, and you will marry and have a happy life.”

“I do hope so,” said Sophia.

The two walked back to the house, and when they got there, Sophia went off to get ready for dinner. Neville checked in on the staff in the dining room and kitchens, even though he did not really know what he was looking for. He liked to be seen around the Castle, and if people looked busy, then that was enough for him. He talked to both the steward and the housekeeper before retiring to his bedroom with his valet to ready himself.

Neville was shaved before he took a bath. When he was clean from head to toe, his valet helped him put on his formal breeches, shirt, waistcoat, tailcoat, and boots. Neville preferred to put on his own cravat. He checked the time and still had thirty minutes before they arrived. That was just enough time for some cognac, and he found the butler downstairs to help him with his refreshment needs.

When the carriage arrived on the grounds, Sophia had graced the foyer with her presence, wearing a flowing light blue dress, tight around the waist and with ruffles on the shoulders.

The butler had the door open as the guests ascended the stone steps to the castle entrance, and they were ushered in, and greetings were made. Neville was pleased to see that Maximilian was dressed as

formally as he was, and he had taken obvious care to curate his appearance for the dinner. Julia was a picture too and wore a green dress that showed off her figure. She was not a tall woman, but she was one with curves and had retained a shapely figure even though she was almost fifty.

The guests were led through to the dining room, where they were sat and offered refreshments.

“I wish to thank you for your kind invitation,” said Maximilian, raising his glass of wine into the air. “I do not believe that I have ever dined in a castle before. This is truly a spectacular building.”

“Thank you, Maximilian,” said Neville, extremely proud of the building himself. “It was obtained by my great, great grandfather and now belongs to me. I do not have a son of my own, but I would like to pass the Castle on to whoever my daughter may marry.”

“Father,” said Julia. “It sounds as if you are trying to bribe the dear young man.”

“I am doing no such thing. I am merely stating the facts,” said Neville.

“Your words hold a lot of sway,” said Maximilian with a smile. He looked around the large dining room, taking in the artwork that was hung on the walls before settling on Sophia. “It is beautiful.”

Neville watched as his daughter blushed, and he felt joy in his heart. He was worried that he would have to orchestrate bringing the two of them together, but they were off to a great start. He turned his attention to Julia, not wanting to leave her out of the conversation. “My daughter is not the only beautiful lady here tonight,” he said, raising his glass.

“Thank you,” said Julia. She smiled at Neville and also looked between Maximilian and Sophia. It was evident that she also liked the match between the two.

Soup arrived as the starter, a hearty broth with parsnips and carrots, and there was silence for a while as the soup was delicately eaten without being slurped.

“My mother tells me that you are interested in what is going on in the colonies,” said Maximilian.

Neville perked up at the mention of the colonies. “I hear that we are at war over there. What do you know of the situation?”

“My friend with the shipping company makes frequent trips back and forth or, at least, his people do. I do not think that the war will last very long. Although, if it gets more serious, I have half a mind to enlist and go over there myself.”

“Take matters into your own hands. I like a man who knows what he wants,” said Neville. He suddenly noticed that Julia had gone quiet beside him, and it came back that her husband had died in the war. “Though it is good to hear that the war may end soon. In most cases, war is never the answer.”

“I cannot believe that you would go over there,” said Sophia. “You might end up getting yourself killed.”

“If that is how I go, then so be it.”

“Do not tempt fate. Dying in war is not always a noble way to die,” said Sophia, putting down her spoon.

“My father died fighting,” said Maximilian, holding Sophia’s gaze.

“Oh,” said Sophia, looking down. “I did not mean—”

“It is fine. I know what you mean to say, and I agree with you. I should not have snapped, but it is a matter that is close to my heart. I know that you did not mean anything by it.”

“No, I did not,” said Sophia quietly.

Neville found himself placing a hand on Julia's arm as she stifled a sob. She did not look at him and continued eating her soup, and he quickly drew his hand away lest he offended her.

"What is mined on your land?" asked Neville, quickly changing the subject.

"Coal mainly," said Maximilian.

Everyone went back to the soup, and the mention of Julia's late husband was soon forgotten. By the time the main course had been served, Sophia was suffering from uncontrollable laughter as Maximilian told a story about when he had inspected a coal mine and almost fallen down a mine shaft, thankfully only suffering from a grime-covered face, but so dirty that his mother did not recognize him. Julia laughed at the story too, and her eyes lit up when she did. It heartened Neville to hear her laugh, and he was glad that both she and her son were enjoying the evening.

The desserts came, and they were served with port. Outside, the sun was setting, and there was a slight breeze in the air, a welcome one. Plates were scraped clean, and Maximilian spoke first.

"Your Grace, would it be acceptable if I took a stroll in your magnificent gardens with your daughter. I witnessed them on the way in, but I would like to take a closer look."

"That would be agreeable," said Neville. "And I am sure that Sophia would like that."

"I would," said Sophia.

There were footmen there to pull out the chairs so that Maximilian and Sophia could rise, and Maximilian held out his arm when he stood. Neville watched the two of them leave, arm in arm, and he could not help the smile on his face.

"Perhaps some more port, Lady Julia?" he asked, turning back to her.

“No, thank you, Your Grace. I fear it will be too much for me.”

Neville motioned for his glass to be filled. “I believe that went rather well,” he said. “Those two will make a fine match.”

“I think that you are right,” said Julia.

“You have raised a fine boy.” Neville took another sip of the port. “You can tell a lot about a person by how their children act. You have done well by the boy, and your husband would be proud of you.”

“Thank you,” said Julia. She looked away.

“Please tell me if I am overstepping the mark in any way.”

Julia turned back to face him. “You are acting like a perfect gentleman, and I am glad that I am sat here with you. My husband passed a long time ago, and I have made my peace with it, but it is still hard.”

“I understand,” said Neville. He wanted to talk about his wife, his beautiful Gloria, but he held back again. He held Julia’s gaze again, and she looked away. There was a spark in her eyes that he was sure he did not have. She had lost her love, but she seemed happy, almost jubilant at times. Neville did not feel like that. It had been close to twenty years, and he was still saddened by his wife’s passing, unable to find happiness in even the smallest things.

All except his daughter’s happiness. If he could find happiness for her, perhaps he would find it himself too.

“Do you ever think about remarrying?” asked Neville.

“The question seemed to shock Julia. “I do not know. I mean, I have thought about it, but I do not think that I ever will. I loved William, and I am not sure that I will find that again.”

“There is still time,” said Neville, quoting the words that his daughter

had told him time and time again. "I did mean it when I said that you were a beautiful woman.

Julia smiled and blushed, but she had nothing to say.

As Neville took her in, he really did mean it. Her dress displayed her curvaceous figure, and he found his eyes moving over it. She had a beguiling face with freckles that gave a down-to-earth look. The eyes were as rich and vibrant as his wife's, but blue instead of green, and her thin lips were curved into an almost permanent smile. She was a beautiful woman; there was no doubt about that.

As Neville sat there, he felt guilty. His wife was not here, so he should not feel as if he was betraying her, but he felt just that. He was supposed to be finding a suitor for his daughter, but he found he wanted something for himself. The feeling took hold for a brief moment before he shook it from his mind. Perhaps it was the influence of the port.

Neville straightened his thoughts. When his daughter was happy, he was happy, and that was all that mattered. He did not have time to be lusting over this woman, no matter how alluring he found her. The scent of lavender came through the window, and it took him back to an evening over twenty years ago when he had sat in the very same room with his wife. She had told Neville that she was pregnant, and it was the happiest day of his life.

The Duke found himself standing, and Julia stood too. The image of his wife came to him, and it melted his heart. Without thinking, Neville leaned forwards and kissed the woman in front of him.

## Chapter 4

Sophia stood in yet another large house with her father, sporting another dress that was far too uncomfortable and waiting for more suitors to approach her to ask her to dance. It was all becoming rather boring. She had met a few men who were worthy of getting to know better, but they had not been good enough for her father. Sophia would rather he just chose one, and she could get on with her life.

If she had to marry, then so be it, but she was becoming tired of the whole thing and was beginning to think that she may never get married after all. And, the one man her father actually approved of was not going to be at the ball. Maximilian had taken sick, and her father had insisted that they come to the ball anyway.

"I thought that you wanted me to marry Maximilian," uttered Sophia as they walked through the elaborate ballroom.

"It is better to be safe than sorry. We do not know how it will work out with Maximilian, so it is prudent to explore other options too." There was something in her father's voice that she could sense but not identify.

"Father, are you feeling well? Ever since the dinner with Maximilian and his mother, you have not been yourself. Perhaps we should return home."

"I am fine," said Neville, though it was clear that he was not. "I just do not think that..." He did not finish his sentence, and Sophia did not probe any further.



She looked around the great hall, another in a long list of decorated halls that she had danced in, and wished that she could just settle down with a good man and start a family. She knew that her father wanted her to have what he had with her mother, but he had to let her go some time. At this rate, she would soon be far too old to marry.

Sophia smiled and gazed around the room, putting on an aloof expression as another handsome man approached her. The repetition of it all was becoming uninspiring, but there was still a thrill in being asked to dance by a striking gentleman.

“Thank you for coming, Your Grace,” said the man, extending his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you finally.”

“Lord Vassiley, it is a pleasure to meet you,” replied Neville. “Allow me to introduce my daughter, Sophia.”

“Ah, Lady Sophia, it is a pleasure to meet you.” The Baron took her hand and kissed it. There was a hint of an accent when he spoke, suggesting that he was not native to this land.

“The pleasure is all mine, My Lord,” said Sophia, staring into his rich chestnut eyes.

“I must insist that I have the first dance with you,” said Baron Vassiley. “I will not take no for an answer. It would be a delectable honor to dance with such a beautiful woman.”

“Well, if you insist,” said Sophia, taking the dance card from her sleeve and passing it to the Baron so he could fill in his name. He smiled the entire time.

“You have a fine house,” said Neville.

“My mother’s residence,” said Baron Vassiley with a wave of his hand. “I do not get the chance to visit here as often as I like. I find that I am constantly on the move, but I spend most of my time in the city.”

“What is it you do there, sir?” asked Neville.

“I run a shipping company. We mostly trade goods with Scotland and France, but we ship around the world too. You may have heard of V&R Shipping.”

“Vassiley is the V of V&R,” said Neville.

“It is,” said the Baron with a smile. He glanced back at Sophia, and his smile widened.

“Very impressive,” said Neville.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Baron Vassiley bowed. “I shall leave you to fill your dance card, Lady Sophia. I am sure that it will not take long, though every ounce of my being compels me to insist that I be allowed to take your second dance also, but I will not be so bold as to suggest it.”

“You are most kind,” said Sophia. She looked at her father and hoped that he made it so, but he did not. He had got his wish, though. He might have his heart set on Maximilian, but Baron Vassiley would make a fine backup. The Baron bowed again and left Sophia with her father. She watched him go—his thick legs and strong back stirring something within her. He had something that Maximilian did not.

\* \* \*

When the dances began, Sophia found excitement in her stomach as Baron Vassiley took her by the waist. Another man had approached as she stood with her father, a noble of some kind, but she only had eyes for the Baron now, and she pulled herself a little closer to him than she did with the other men she had danced with over the past year.

The music began, and everyone moved as one. Sophia could feel his tight shoulder muscles and his strong grip on her hand. She gazed into his eyes as they danced, and he returned the look, his brown eyes luxurious in the light of the hall. She quickly glanced him up and

down now that she had him alone, and she could see a muscular body under the elegant clothes. She did not know what was coming over her.

“I have not seen you at the balls before tonight,” said Sophia.

“I often do not have time for them, but my mother put this one on especially for me. Family is very important, and I would do anything for my mother.”

“Seductive and caring,” whispered Sophia before adding, “I apologize, My Lord. I do not know where that came from. I did not mean to say it out loud.”

“You should always speak from the heart,” said Baron Vassiley. “Please, do not be afraid to speak your heart in front of me.”

“Thank you,” said Sophia, liking this man more and more. His hand shifted on her waist, and a jolt of pleasure ran through her. “I notice an accent.”

“You are very perceptive, Lady Sophia. “From the ages of twelve to eighteen, I lived in France. My father was in the military, and we moved around a lot. I have traveled extensively, and I hope to do so again. There are so many places to see around the world. England is beautiful, but there is more out there.”

“My mother always wanted to travel,” said Sophia.

“From how you speak of her, she is not around anymore, is she.” The Baron went from looking enticing to sultry. Sophia wanted to collapse into him and have him hold her.

“She died in childbirth. There was nothing that could be done for her. Sometimes, I wish—”

“No, do not say it,” said the Baron. “Everything happens for a reason, and the Lord brought you into this world to add beauty to it. Do not

take your life so lightly. You have been blessed with this gift—years of existence to make a difference, and you need to do all that you can to make this world a better place. Every struggle that we go through is only to bring greater pleasure at the end.”

“I do not know what to say to that,” said Sophia. “The way that you talk is quite beautiful.”

“And the way that you look is quite beautiful,” said Baron Vassiley.

Sophia blushed but could not help but smile.

“You must allow me to speak my mind,” said the Baron, “for there is no other way that a man should talk.”

“Please do,” said Sophia.

“I like to think that I know people, having worked with them my entire life. I do not say this to be boastful; I am merely speaking in fact.”

“Of course,” said Sophia.

“When I first saw you, I saw beauty, but there was more there. You are holding yourself back, are you not? I can tell that you are promised to another man, and that is why you cannot give yourself to me.”

“My father wants me to wed Maximilian.”

“But there is no spark there, is there? I can tell.”

“You are very perceptive,” said Sophia. Maximilian was an amazing man, but she did not feel a spark, not like she felt with this man, and she had barely known him for more than a few minutes. Surely her father would want her to pursue this after his talk of true love, though when he made up his mind, he often did not change it.

Baron Vasilley spun Sophia and pulled her in even closer. She could smell the sandalwood cologne, and it reminded her of a memory from her childhood, but she could not remember which one—her mind was too focused on something else, on someone else.

“I never did believe in love at first sight,” said Baron Vassiley, “but I have changed my mind. I was enraptured by you from the moment I saw you walk into this house.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Sophia. She wanted him to lean forward and kiss her and did not care that there were people around. The way that he spoke, his scent, his rugged handsomeness, it was all intoxicating and she wrapped herself in it.

“I shall tell your father that he has chosen the wrong man for you,” said the Baron.

“You cannot do that,” said Sophia. “He believes that he has chosen the perfect man for me, and I do not think that he will change his mind. And from how Maximilian acts, I believe that *he* thinks the same. I know that his heart was not set on marriage until he met me, and he is being pressured by his mother to settle down, and...oh, I do not know. It is all rather messy.”

“Life will find a way,” said Baron Vasilley. “Until then,” the Baron looked around the room, searching for the words, “it will be our little secret.”

Sophia’s eyes widened. She wanted to work things out with Maximilian and then her father, as that would then lead to her marrying this wonderful man, but the thought of this being a secret overwhelmed her with excitement. It made her tingle like never before.

“Yes, our secret,” she whispered. A smile developed across her face, and the same happened to the Baron. This must have been how her father felt when he first met her mother. If he was watching them dance, Sophia was sure that he would see the connection between

them, and would drop the idea of her and Maximilian.

The music stopped, and Sophia felt lost again. She wanted the dance to last forever. She wanted to be in Maximilian's presence forever. She had someone else to dance with, but she could not remember the man's name, nor could she picture what he looked like. There was only one man for her now.

"Will I get to see you again?" asked Sophia.

"I will contact you soon," said the Baron, kissing her on the hand. "I have big plans for you, Sophia. Your life is not going to be the same again."

## Chapter 5

Julia sat by the fire with her needlepoint and slowly followed the pattern she had set out on the table. The dry logs crackled, and the embers glowed. It was not cold this evening, but Julia found comfort in the flickering of the flames and stared into them when she rested her fingers. They were not as nimble as they once were.

She tried to distract her mind, but she could not stop thinking about the kiss. It had come out of nowhere, and she had to admit that she had been extremely surprised by it and had not known what to do or say after. The Duke had apologized profusely after the brief kiss, and she had not known what to say after that either. He was the first man that she had kissed since her husband had passed. Or the first man who had kissed *her*.

She tried not to think about it, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not look at the clock above the fireplace. She had been gifted the clock on her first wedding anniversary with William, and it had been faithful ever since. She had not been faithful. Julia berated herself for thinking that way. William had been gone for years, but still, she lived as if he was still around.

The needle slipped and dug into the skin of her thumb, a spot of blood appearing soon after. She quickly went to the kitchen to find some water, the maid there helping her to wash the wound. It did not need a bandage.

“Mother?”

Julia spun around to find her son there.



“Are you injured, Mother? What happened?”

“Oh, nothing. My hand slipped, and I pricked myself. Why are you out of bed? Are you feeling better?”

“I feel a little better,” said Maximilian. “I feel hungry,”

“That is good news,” said Julia.

“Shall I warm some broth, sir?” asked the maid.

“Yes, thank you,” said Maximilian. “And some tea, too.”

“I will have it brought through to the dining room, sir,” said the maid, quickly springing into action, pulling pots from the shelf from the far side of the kitchen.

“I was worried that you might have typhus,” said Julia as she helped her son through to the dining room. He was on his feet, which heartened her, but he was still weak. The butler was ready for them in the dining room, and he pulled out the chair for Max to sit in before helping Julia into hers.

“Lady Sophia will have been upset for you to miss the ball tonight,” said Julia. She looked down at her thumb, and there was no blood anymore, though there was a slight throbbing.

“I suppose,” said Maximilian.

Julia could not be sure if his lack of enthusiasm were because of his current energy levels or because of Sophia. “She is a fine woman,” she stated.

“She is, Mother, and she will make a fine wife. I do not believe that I have met anyone quite like her. It is fortuitous that you bumped into the Duke of Ebinbran.”

“Yes, fortuitous,” echoed Julia. She thought again about the second

time that he had bumped into her, and it stirred something within her that had been long forgotten. There was excitement, and there was guilt. The Duke had too much port, that was clear, and she could have been any woman. He had overstepped the mark, and he had made that clear when they had come apart. Julia only hoped that the kiss did not mess up what her son had with his daughter.

“Marriage is difficult,” said Julia. “I may have fallen in love with your father once we were together, but we were both young and naive when we were promised to each other. I did not know who this man was, and he did not know me. I was afraid, but our parents could see how love would blossom between us, and it did. Love is not something that happens overnight; it is a feeling that grows over time. The only way to make that happen is to spend time with a person, and that comes through marriage.”

“And, do I have a say in the matter?” asked Maximilian.

“Of course you do, and you must see that Lady Sophia is a fine match for you. If she were horrid to you when the two of you were alone, I am sure that you would say something, and we could rectify the matter, but I do not believe that she would be like that.”

“No, she is extremely polite and well-spoken. Educated too.”

“Well, there you go then. She is the perfect woman for you,” said Julia.

“No one is perfect,” said Maximilian.

“You sound as if you want to argue with me, Maximilian, and I will put that down to your fever. Here is your soup. Eat and get your strength back.”

The maid entered the dining room with the soup, and she placed it down in front of Maximilian. Another maid followed her in with the tea, placing a tray down with a teapot, cups, cream, and sugar. The maid poured the tea, and Julia took a cup for herself too.

“Excuse me, Lady Julia. There was a knock at the door, and these were delivered for you.” A third maid had entered the room, and she was holding a bouquet of flowers. “Shall I put them in a vase?”

“Please do,” said Julia.

“Who are they from?” asked Maximilian. “Do you have a secret admirer, Mother?”

“I have no such thing.” Julia scoffed. She turned to the maid. “Was there a note with the flowers?”

“There was,” said the maid, passing a small card to Julia. “I will put these in water right away.

The maid left, and Julia slowly opened the card, unsure who would have sent her flowers. She had not received flowers from anyone since William had passed. When she saw the name inside, she almost shut the card, but Maximilian was interested in who had sent them too. First a kiss from the Duke of Edinbran and now flowers. She quickly read the card.

*I hope that I was not too forward during dinner. I only want for your son and my daughter to be wed. Nothing more.*

*The Duke of Edinbran.*

She closed the note and placed it on the table next to her saucer before taking a sip of the tea.

“Come on, Mother, do not leave me wondering,” said Maximilian. It may have been the soup or the mystery flowers, but something had given him some strength.

"They are from the Duke of Edinbran," she said.

"Are they?" Maximilian smiled and raised an eyebrow as he continued to eat the soup.

"He only wanted to thank us for coming to dinner, and he finds you a perfect match for his daughter. That is all."

"And here was me thinking that he was trying to court you, Mother."

"Do not say such silly things. For one, you are to marry his daughter, and the Duke has no interest in the likes of me." She found herself almost hoping that the Duke did have some interest in her. The kiss and now the flowers had her heart beating as it used to when she was being courted by William. It made her feel young again.

"The Duke should be happy to have a woman like you. He would not be able to do any better. That is not what I mean. You are wonderful, Mother. There are no other women out there like you, and he will not be able to find a woman who could measure up to you, and that is a fact."

"Oh, I think that you are delirious from your fever. Look at me, Maximilian. I am old and plain. Finding love once in my life is enough for me."

"You should not settle for that," said Maximilian. "Many a man would be proud to have you on their arm, and you should always follow your heart. I am sure that the Duke does not send flowers to just anyone. You say that the flowers were to thank us for coming to supper, but the note was addressed only to you."

"Will you please stop talking about the Duke," said Julia. "If I were to marry again, it would not be to the Duke. He entertains me because he wants you to marry his daughter, and that is all. I am too old for the nonsense of courting now. That is for the young."

"He reminds me a little of Father."

The words shocked Julia. Maximilian had known his father into his early teenage years, but to hear someone compare another man to the love of her life was startling. “He does?”

“In some ways. The way that he has a single focus on his daughter and finding a husband for her, Father was like that in a lot of ways, especially after joining the military. He was always very organized and serious. When he put his mind to something, he would not let anything stand in his way.”

“He was like that,” said Julia, “but you are missing out the important parts. He was also a very gentle man. He would buy me flowers and gifts.”

Maximilian quickly gestured toward the note on the table, indicating at the flowers that were being put in water.

Julia rolled her eyes at him before continuing. “He was extremely romantic, even after we were married. He would constantly surprise me with gifts. He showed me that he loved me in so many ways, and I am glad that I had the years with him that I did. I wish that he was still here so he could see the man you have grown into. If there is anyone who reminds me of your father, it is you, Maximilian.”

“I do not think that I could ever receive a finer compliment. But, do you not want to have that again? That spark with someone?”

“Yes, I do, but I am not greedy. I had that spark when most do not. It is not something that you can force, and I can see what you are trying to say. You may not feel that spark with Sophia, but I did not feel it with your father at first. It will grow over time, and you have to trust that I know what I am talking about.”

“I do, Mother. I know that you only want the best for me.”

“And that means getting some rest. Now that you have eaten, you should lie down again and try to get some sleep. You need your strength.”

Maximilian took the last spoonful of his soup and then stood to go back upstairs. His personal valet was soon at his side and walked with him out of the room should he need any help.

Julia's thumb was feeling better, and she went back to the sitting room to finish her needlepoint in front of the fire. Someone had been in to place more logs on, and they crackled, sending up sparks that quickly fizzled out.

She and William would spend evenings in here in front of the fire, the two of them cuddled up under a blanket talking about everything. When the silences stretched between them, they would be magical too. And when the silence went on for too long, he would kiss her to disturb the quiet. Julia thought about her son's words. She did want that again, ached for it, but it was harder as an older woman.

When the Duke had kissed her, it had rekindled feelings inside, and she had hoped that he would kiss her again, but he did not. He had now made it quite clear that it was a mistake. She resigned herself to her fate. It was much too late in life for a man to come and sweep her off her feet, no matter how deeply she desired the passion of it

## Chapter 6

Neville had been hesitant in sending an invitation after what had happened, but he overcame his own foolish feelings. This was not about him; it was about his daughter. He had made a mistake, one that he would not make again. There was anger inside him—anger at himself for doing what he had done, but that would pass. The marriage between his daughter and Maximilian would go on.

“I very much liked Baron Vassiley,” said Sophia as they walked through the castle on the way to meet with Maximilian and his mother. They had already arrived and had been seated outside.

“He seems like a fine man, but I would like to know more about him first. Not much is known about him, and that could mean that he is hiding something.”

“Father, he is the perfect gentleman. He is not hiding anything.”

“If that is the case, then he will be considered, but I do not believe that he is as suited to you as Maximilian is. I have seen the way that the two of you get on. You will be very happy with him.”

“Yes, Father,” she said.

The Castle may have been old, but the foundations were solid. Generations had taken care of the Castle, but none so much as the Duke of Edinbran. He had brought the best stonemasons from across the country, and they constantly worked to keep the stonework in excellent shape, so much so that the old grey stone seemed to shine when the sun hit it the right way.



The interior had been improved in the last few years too, and the stone interior had been embellished with pine and mahogany, especially intricate on the banisters running up the grand staircase in the middle of the castle.

Neville was extremely proud of the Castle and had spent a great deal of time and money to make sure that it did not go to ruin. It was the least that he could do to honor the history of the great structure. It had survived wars in the past, and there was no way that he was going to let it go to ruin during times of peace.

He saw Julia first when they exited the Castle. He regretted the kiss, but he did not regret that it had been with her. He could have made a grave mistake and thrust himself on any woman in his slightly intoxicated state, and he was thankful that he had thrust himself on such a graceful and elegant woman, as undignified as the act was. He hoped that the flowers had smoothed everything over.

Julia stood, and even in a simple summer dress, she looked beautiful. Neville noticed the curves again and was happy to admire her form for its beauty and nothing more. He knew a beautiful woman when he saw one, and it was never wrong to admit that as long as that was as far as he took it.

“Maximilian,” said Neville, holding out his hand to shake.

“Your Grace, ” he replied.

“Lady Julia,” he said, extending his hand again, and he suddenly felt nervous. Maximilian walked over to greet Sophia, and Neville leaned in closer as he shook Julia’s hand. “I must apologize again. I did not mean for it to happen, and it will not again,” he whispered.

“I understand,” said Julia. “It is already forgotten.”

Maximilian and Sophia reached the small table and chairs.

“I would very much like to entertain the two of you with lunch, but I

thought that perhaps Maximilian and I would engage in some fencing before we did that.”

“Fencing?” asked Maximilian. “I have not fenced in years.”

“Your father must have taught you, being a military man,” said Neville.

“He did, but that was a long time ago, and he was only able to teach me the basics.”

“Then you must allow me to show you some more moves. Every man should learn how to fence.”

“You will go easy on me?” asked Maximilian with a smile.

“I cannot promise anything,” said Neville with a wink. The four walked back through the Castle toward the interior courtyard where Neville liked to practise fencing when he had a spare moment. On the way, he instructed a footman to have the fencing gear brought, and it arrived soon after the four did.

The middle courtyard was surrounded on all sides by gray stone, but it was wide enough to allow a generous amount of sunlight to come from above. The grass of the courtyard was emerald, and Neville was proud of the job that his gardeners did both here and in all other areas of the Castle. Summer was a cacophony of color.

“I must admit, Your Grace, that I am rather amazed each time I visit your castle. Just when I think that I have seen it all, I am surprised again.”

“Thank you,” said Neville. It would not be long before Maximilian and Sophia both lived here, and they would bring grandkids that would soon fill the Castle with laughter. “Ah, here is the fencing gear. You know how to put it on?”

“I do,” said Maximilian. The two men donned the protective gear, and

they sparred. Neville wanted to see where the young man was at, and it turned out that his father had trained him well, even though he was a little rusty.

“For someone who has not fought for a while, you have poise and grace in your style.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“I only hope that you will treat my daughter with as much strength and poise as you do your sword. She will need a steady hand to guide her and someone who can also be gentle when it calls for it.”

Maximilian hesitated for a moment before replying, “I do not take matters of marriage lightly.”

That satisfied Neville, and he pulled down his mask to start again. Sophia and Julia had been sat watching, and Sophia suddenly piped up. “Father, I think it rude that only the men should get all the fun. When do I get to spar with you?”

“I do not think it right,” started Neville, but a thought popped into his head. Gloria had once engaged in hunting with him, and it had brought the two of them closer together. “Well, put on some of the protective gear, and Maximilian can show you everything that he has just learned.”

Sophia shot a wry smile at her father, and he could tell that she had seen immediately through his plan, but she did not refuse. She got up from her chair and started donning the face mask and the chest protector. Before she pulled down the mask, she flashed her father a smile and said, “I do not think that Lady Julia should be left to sit alone. While Maximilian is showing me how to wield a sword, perhaps you can show the lady?”

“I would not know where to start,” stuttered Julia.

“Nonsense, Mother,” said Maximilian. “You will be fine. Why do you

not show His Grace a thing or two.”

Julia scoffed and then laughed, but she stood up. “It might be fun. I have never held a sword before. Is that fine with you, Your Grace?”

“Of course,” said Neville with a smile, but his heart beat faster inside. “Just make sure to put on the protection correctly.”

“Father, you must help her if she has never fenced before.”

“Of course,” said Neville. He put down his sword and walked over to Julia, picking up some of the fencing gear. “Well, this is the mask, which protects your face, obviously. And this protects your chest, um, your torso protection. Just make sure that it is pulled tight.”

“Like this?” asked Julia, putting on the chest protector.

“Allow me,” said Neville. He moved around to the back of her and pulled on the straps, tightening and then tying them. He helped her on with the rest of the equipment and passed her a sword. “Like this,” he said, showing her how to hold the epee. She did exactly as she was told.

“Now, I am going to thrust my sword toward you, and I want you to bat it away like this.” He showed her the motion, and she copied it a few times before he thrust with his sword. Neville moved slowly, and Julia knocked his sword away with hers. She pulled up her mask and smiled at him.

“You are a very good teacher.”

“It will be much harder in a real match,” said Neville. “Much faster.”

“Show me more,” said Julia.

“We will do the same again, but this time, you thrust your sword, and I will parry it. Do not be afraid to come at me quickly; the chest protector will protect me if you do manage to get through.

Julia nodded and waited for his signal. When Neville was ready, she thrust her sword, and he parried it. He could hear a laugh come from under her mask, and it made him happy. He was enjoying himself too.

“Again, but faster this time,” he said.

She waited for the signal again and attacked when he said. She plunged the sword faster, but Neville parried it easily. They did the move two more times before Neville pulled up his mask. He could see Maximilian a little ways away explaining something to Sophia, and she had a large smile on her face. Everything was back on track.

“Your form is poor,” said Neville. He chuckled. “I do not mean to say that to put you off. You are a beginner, and every beginner’s form is off to start with. Here, let me show you.” Neville put down his sword and circled around so that he was behind Julia again. He reached around with one hand and took the wrist of the hand that had the sword in it.

“Like this,” he said, bending her wrist slightly to straighten the sword. “And your other hand.” He took hold of her free hand and raised it behind her. “This will help you to maintain your balance, and strike and defend better. And your body position.” He did not think about it as he put his hands on her waist, turning her body slightly and then moving his hand around to her abdomen to straighten her.

It could have been the fact that she was wearing the protection that made him forget there was a woman under there, but the feel of her soft curves soon reminded him, and his hands lingered on her abdomen and waist as he moved her body into position. He stood against her, and she pressed herself into him. Still, he did not move, the feelings stirring within.

He wanted to move his hands over her body, to push his fingers under the protection that she was wearing. Below that, her dress flowed, and he had an urge to pull it up, to feel things that he had not felt in a long time. He was sure that Julia could feel it too, and he might have let himself go if he was not awakened by the clang of a sword from

the other side of the courtyard.

Neville looked up to see his daughter and Maximilian clashing swords, and he knew that this could never be. He would not do it to his wife, and he would not do it to his daughter. He let go of Julia and pulled his mask back down. She was frozen in place, her chest rising and falling quickly as she breathed in short breaths.

“Keep that position,” said Neville. “Now, come at me with the sword again.” She thrust at him quicker, but he parried it again. She had almost cut through his defenses, but he was stronger than that and would not let it happen.

## Chapter 7

Julia took off the protective gear, and she felt herself trembling. She glanced over at the Duke as he removed his gear too, and she ached for his touch again. When he had his hands on her waist, and she had pressed herself back into him, it was the most alive that she had felt in years. Yet, he had quickly put an end to it, just as he had with the kiss, and she knew the reason.

He was a Duke who lived in a castle, and she was an old woman who lived with her son. He could have any woman that he wanted, and he knew it. She would never be able to live up to that, but that did not stop her from fantasizing about it.

As Neville used his fingers to unbuckle, she imagined those same fingers roving over her body. His hands were strong; she had felt that when she was in his embrace, but he was gentle too, guiding her body slowly during the fencing lesson. He was also powerful and confident, and she wanted to be taken by him. She wondered if her only hope was for him to make another mistake with her. She would take it, she knew that: a kiss, a stray touch, anything to feel how she had once felt with William.

“We shall take lunch in the gardens,” said Neville to one of the footmen. He turned to Julia. “Will you accompany me to the gardens?”

Julia could only nod, and Neville quickly walked away. She followed behind, scanning the back of him as he walked, particularly his rear. He was a handsome man, just as her William had been; there was no doubt about it. His shoulders were broad, his legs thick and strong in

the tight breeches, and his rear looked like rumps of meat bound in leather. Julia licked her lips as she walked behind, and she felt a little faint.

Lunch was a quieter affair, and she found that Neville did not talk to her all that much. It made her think that she was the one who had been in the wrong. He had been trying to teach her how to fence, only helping her find the correct form, and it had been *her* who had pressed herself against him. Though, his hands had lingered on her more than they should have. She was mixed up inside and did not know what any of it meant.

“I have arranged for the two of you to take the boat out on the lake,” said Neville to Maximilian and Sophia as the lunch dishes were being cleared by the staff. “It is a beautiful day for a boat ride.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Sophia. “I always like to take the sailboat out.”

“Then you shall have to be the one to captain the ship,” said Maximilian with a laugh. “I have never sailed in my life, and I would not know where to start.”

“I shall repay you for the fencing lesson,” said Sophia with a smile.

Julia found her attention taken from the Duke and placed on her son and Sophia. She had to forget about him; that would only complicate things, not that anything would ever come of it. She looked between Maximilian and Sophia and could see how happy they were. The Duke had been right; they were a perfect match. It warmed her heart that Maximilian had finally found a woman who would give him children.

“Will you take my arm, Lady Julia,” said Neville, rising from the table. “We shall walk down to the boat launch. There is a place to sit while we have refreshments.”

“Oh, of course,” said Julia. She took the Duke’s arm and was conflicted again. Most of the older men she knew did not take as much



pride in their appearance as the Duke did, and it was clear that he kept his body in shape, as well as dressing himself well. She walked arm in arm with the Duke down to the lake, a short distance from the Castle.

Four or five men were working to have the boat ready, hoisting the sail in the middle of the small boat and loading a basket with food. The Duke had gone all out to ensure that the two would be happy on the short sailing. Julia was glad that there were refreshments waiting for them too—the heat was taking its toll, and she was unstable on her feet. When the drink was offered to her, she took it gladly but did not burden anyone with the fact that she was not feeling herself. She did not want to ruin the day for Maximilian.

When the boat was ready, it was pushed out into the water with Sophia and Maximilian aboard. Julia watched as Sophia took charge and moved the main sail, guiding them out into the lake. Maximilian liked to learn new skills, and he would be a welcome student. Education in every aspect of life was very important.

“I believe that it is going rather well,” said Neville.

It took Julia a moment to realize that he was talking about the two on the boat. “It is. Maximilian seems to be taken by your daughter.”

“And she by him,” said Neville.

“I must thank you for the fencing lesson,” said Julia, gauging the Duke for a reaction, but none came except his reply.

“You are welcome. You are a good student.”

“Being a good student is very important,” said Julia. “Education is very important in our day and age.”

“I couldn't agree more,” said Neville. “I made sure to give Sophia the very best education that I could.”

Julia nodded and took a sip of her drink. She desperately wanted to ask about his wife. She knew that the woman was not around anymore, but she did not know in what capacity. She had mentioned her husband, but he had not mentioned his wife, and she respected the man enough to give him his privacy. She did not think it right to pry and find out from someone else.

“I feel a little faint,” said Julia, the feeling hitting her more. She placed her drink down on the table, standing up. “Perhaps a walk will help me.”

“Allow me,” said Neville, rising too.

Before she knew what was happening, the world was spinning around her. She tried to grab onto the table, but it was in the air now, and the lake was not where it should be. She grabbed again and felt something brace her fall, and then she was lying down with the world still spinning. When she opened her eyes, William was there. He looked exactly as he had when he had gone off to war.

Julia reached up and cupped his cheeks, a smile coming to her face. “My love,” she whispered. “My love.”

\* \* \*

The boat moved slowly out into the middle of the lake, and Sophia took one last look back at her father and Julia sitting by the lake enjoying their refreshments. The day was glorious, and the sun beat down on them from above. As she looked out across the water, the ripples caused by the slight breeze glimmered like diamonds. It was a breathtaking sight.

“Look,” said Sophia, pointing back toward the Castle. Maximilian looked to where she was pointing, the Castle in all its glory. It stood tall and proud, a testament to time.

“It really is magnificent,” said Maximilian.

"I love this place so much," said Sophia. "It is beautiful, and it is home. There is no place on Earth that I would rather be, and yet I want to see everything else in the world." Baron Vassiley flashed in her mind. She looked out into the distance and smiled.

"We need to have a serious discussion about the future," said Maximilian.

Sophia turned back to him and could see what he wanted to say in his eyes. She smiled at him and took his hand. "I feel the exact same way."

"I thought that we could force it, but it is just not working, is it?" asked Maximilian.

"You are an amazing man, and I care for you deeply, but we are not meant to wed each other."

"Well, this is distinctly easier than I thought. I have always believed that I should be free to wed whomever I wanted to without being forced into it. My mother is passionate about this, and I do not know what it will do to her when I tell her the truth."

"Your mother and my father are of a different generation," said Sophia. "I agree that we should be free to wed whoever we want and not who we are told to. I know that my father feels the same if only he would think about it. He and my mother fell in love at first sight, and I know that he still believes in that." Sophia looked away and smiled.

"He is not the only one who believes in that," said Maximilian with a knowing look.

Sophia almost burst out laughing. "The ball that you were too ill to attend, I met a Baron there."

"And he has captured your heart?"

"I believe that he has. It is much different than when I first met you.

Sorry, that does not sound very nice, does it.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Maximilian. “You need to follow your heart.”

“I cannot believe that we are having this conversation,” said Sophia. “It almost makes me want to decide to marry you. Any woman would be lucky to have a man like you.”

“And any man, you,” said Maximilian.

Sophia opened the picnic basket and pulled out the bottle of wine. “How about we celebrate our decision not to get married with some wine?”

“You read my mind,” said Maximilian.

Sophia took the rope attached to the main sail and pulled on it. She let the sail down to still the boat and passed the rope to Maximilian. “Tie this over there.” She pointed to a metal hook. Maximilian did as instructed as Sophia opened the wine and poured two glasses. They each took one and clinked the glasses gently against each other before drinking.

A swan swam close to the boat, stopping to study it before swimming on again.

“What are we going to tell them?” asked Maximilian.

“That is the tricky part. My father has his heart set on you, and I sound ridiculous even saying that, but it is true. I believe that he will come around to the Baron in time, especially when he realizes that we are not meant to be together, but I have a different idea.”

“Please share,” said Maximilian.

“I do not know what it is, but I can sense that my father is both uncomfortable and happier in the presence of your mother. If I did not

know any better, I might think that he likes her.”

“My mother has been different since we met, but I had put it down to her hopes of marriage for me.”

“And did you see how they were acting during the fencing lesson? If we were not there, I do not want to imagine what might have happened.” Sophia let out a giggle. “Can it really be true?”

“I did not want to mention it, but I saw it too. There is something between them, that is for sure. My mother deserves love and happiness, and I will do anything to help her to achieve it.”

“Then we have a decision to make. If we tell them that we are not compatible, they may never see each other again.”

“But,” picked up Maximilian, “if we allow them to orchestrate meetings between us, then they will also be orchestrating meetings between themselves.”

“We only have to wait for them to realize that they have feelings for each other and act on that, and then we can tell them that we are not meant for each other.”

“It sounds like the perfect plan,” said Maximilian, raising his glass.

“Our little secret,” said Sophia, raising hers.

They clinked glasses together once more, the plan set. It sent another thrill through Sophia. Now she had two secrets with two different men.

## Chapter 8

Neville watched his daughter go off with Maximilian, and he knew that the romance would be in full blossom after this. A boat ride on Lake Farther was just the thing to take the relationship to the next level. He was aware that his daughter had also taken a liking to a Baron, but Maximilian was the man for her; he was sure of that.

"I feel a little faint," said Julia. "Perhaps a walk will do me good."

Neville rose to his feet immediately when he saw how unsteady she was on hers. "Allow me," he said, reaching out for her hand. He tried to grab her arm, but she fell before he could take it. Her head moved toward the table, and Neville quickly lunged, grabbing her around the waist and cushioning her fall. He lay her down on the ground and looked down at her angelic face.

"Julia? Julia? Speak to me, please." He placed a hand on her forehead to feel that it was a little clammy and then on her soft cheek. When she opened her eyes, he let out a sigh of relief. There were staff approaching, and he raised his hand to let them know that he had it under control. He wanted to take care of her.

"Julia, are you well?" he asked.

"My love," said Julia. She lifted up her hands and cupped his cheeks, her touch, soft. "My love," she repeated again. Neville looked down into her blue eyes and lost himself in them. He had not allowed himself to become close to another woman since his wife had passed, nor had he let another woman touch him, but he found himself entranced by this woman again.

He had kissed her already, held her, and was thinking thoughts again that he should not be. It did not help that her touch felt very much like his wife's used to. He did not move as she held his face and longed for the touch to go on.

"Oh, my goodness," said Julia. Her eyes cleared, and she withdrew her hands from his face. "I did not mean to. I thought..."

Neville placed a hand on her cheek again and held it there. She leaned her face into his hand and closed her eyes. He moved his head down toward her and stopped when their lips were only an inch apart. Her aroma came to him, a sweetness that was delicate and rich. Neville breathed her in, placing his other hand on the ground beside her head. His lips moved closer to hers until they were almost touching, and he could feel that she was eager for him to do it.

Quickly, he jerked his head back and sat on the ground beside her. He had always been strong, but now he felt weak. His wife was the only love of his life, and he could not tarnish her memory by doing this. He got back to his feet as Julia opened her eyes.

"Let me help you up," he said, offering his hand. She took it, and he lifted her back up to her feet. She was unsteady, but she could stand. "I cannot take advantage of you. I just cannot. You are not feeling yourself, and you mistook me for your husband. It would not be right, and I respect you too much."

"Of course," said Julia, looking deflated. "And we are here for our children," she added.

"Yes," said Neville. "How about that walk? Perhaps it will help you to feel better."

"I would like that," said Julia.

Neville offered his arm again, and she took it. They walked off toward the small forest that constituted part of the estate of the Castle. The Duke glanced to the side and could see Julia's ample breasts rising and

falling, her breathing short once more as it had been when he had held her during fencing. When she had been lying on her back, her breasts had risen like two small hills. Her body was a thing of beauty, and he had to use every fiber of his being to stop himself from claiming it, running his hands over every inch of it.

“My—” Neville almost came out and said it. He almost told Julia about his wife and how he could not kiss her like he wanted to because he had promised himself that he would never fall for another woman as long as he lived. She had been taken from him too soon, and he could not go through the pain of that another time. He could never love as strongly another time. If he did, then it would mean that what he had with Gloria was not special. She was everything to him, and he had to keep it that way.

“What is it that you mean to say?” asked Julia.

Neville stopped and looked at her. “Nothing.”

They stood amongst the trees, the breeze playing with the leaves. The canopy above had taken some of the heat of the sun, but it was still warm, and Neville could feel the sweat on his back. He could feel it come to his forehead too, but that was not caused by the sun, it was because of this woman in front of him.

She smiled, but only with her mouth and not her eyes, yet the dimples at the side of her mouth still showed. Her hair was a long and lustrous brown, and he wanted to run his hands through it. He could see each individual freckle on her nose, and he wanted to kiss each one. He stared at her and willed her to kiss him. If she were the one to make a move, then it would not be his fault. He was only a man, and no man would be able to resist this beauty before him. Then, perhaps he could forgive himself after. He berated himself; he was no man if he felt like this.

Instead of kissing him, Julia spoke. “We can have the wedding in the Castle. It will be a wonderful affair.”



“Yes,” agreed Neville. “They shall have everything that they want when the time comes. They will live here after, and I hope that you will too.”

“Oh, I had not thought about that,” said Julia. She turned to walk. “I do not want to intrude on your space.”

“There will be no intrusion,” said Neville. “It will be nice to have a woman around here again, especially one as beautiful as you.” Neville mentally kicked himself for saying it.

“Thank you, Your Grace. It has been some time since I have heard such kind words. I will have to think about living in the Castle. It will be wonderful, of course, but it will be hard to leave my home.”

“I understand,” said Neville. Part of him hoped that she would not come and live in the Castle. He was having a hard enough time keeping his hands off of her as it was without having her living in the same place. Yet, another part of him wanted her close to him. Perhaps then, he could do more. No, he could not think like that. It was not befitting of who he was. Neville felt the redness come to his face, and he did not speak for a while.

There was chirping in the trees as birds came by and left, and a red squirrel darted through the underbrush. They stopped for a while to observe a stag as it chewed on some greenery. It looked up after some time and stared straight at Neville before walking off. The Duke could feel his heart beating faster and faster. He was afraid that he would not be able to contain his lustful feelings.

“We should go back,” he said. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, much,” she said. The color had come back to her cheeks, and there was a glint in her eye. She wrinkled her nose slightly and smiled. “I am sure that Maximilian and Soph—”

Neville could not contain it anymore. He took a step toward her and took her face in his hands, holding her. His lips pressed against hers,

and he held them there. This was not a kiss intoxicated by port but one intoxicated by lust for a beautiful woman. He kept his hands on her cheeks, his heart beating faster and faster as their lips remained locked. He breathed heavily and moved back, their lips parting.

The Duke stood in front of Julia, and he immediately thought about apologizing, but he did not. The woman stood in front of him, chest heaving and lips parted slightly. She stared straight at him, and it was a look that was filled with passion. Neville ran a hand through his hair before stepping forward again, eager for more.

This time, he wrapped his arms around her, cupping under her rear, and he lifted her up into the air. She let out a small gasp, and that only excited him more. There was a tree a little behind her, and Neville carried her backward until he felt her back press against it. As soon as it did, she wrapped her legs around him.

He took a moment and stared into her eyes. Her head was slightly below his, and she looked up at him with a pleading look in her eyes. He knew what she wanted, and he wanted the exact same thing. Her lips were still parted slightly, and when he brought his mouth to hers, he parted his lips too, matching hers.

There was a moistness in her lips this time, and Neville pushed himself into her, his lips pressing her head gently back until her head was resting against the tree, his body pressing against hers, his excitement obvious, and his hands gripped onto her rear. He grasped her supple flesh harder, and it sent a wave of pleasure through him as Julia let out a moan.

He could not contain his lust anymore, and he moved his tongue into her mouth to explore. Her tongue met his, and they pushed against each other, moving around each other as they tilted their heads back and forth in passionate embrace. Neville brought one hand from her rear, holding her up with the other, and placed it on her head, running his fingers through her hair.

He could feel her hands on his back, the nails digging in, and he

enjoyed the feeling. It was raw emotion between two people who had been without it for too long. Neville pulled his lips away from her and then plunged back in, his tongue roving again with more ferocity this time. He pushed his fingers deep into her hair, holding her head so that he could kiss her fully. Moans escaped Julia's lips, and that drove him on.

Julia moved her hands up to his shoulders and gripped onto him, moving her tongue to probe Neville's. He could not remember ever kissing someone like this, not even his wife.

Neville pulled his head away and looked at Julia. She dropped her legs to the ground, taking her own weight, and Neville let go of her rear and her head. He was panting heavily, and he took a step back and then another. In the distance, there was the cawing of a raven or a crow.

The Duke struggled to control his emotions. The passion and lust mixed with anger and confusion. He stared at Julia and was completely shocked at what he had just let himself do.

## Chapter 9

Neville sat in his study, composing a letter to his uncle. The man had suggested that they keep in touch via correspondence now that he had left Edinbran Castle and moved up to the borders. He had lived between London and the border and had continued to move North. Neville would not be surprised if the man had ended up in Scotland. His uncle was crazy enough to consider living there. Neville shook his head and smiled.

As he dipped his quill into the ink, he felt a presence at the door, and his smile widened even more. He could smell her even if he could not see her. The aroma was unmistakable: honeysuckle and rose water. It was delicate and not overpowering as many women liked it. It was distinctly his wife's. He turned with a beaming smile on his face.

"Have you seen this?" she asked, bounding into the room. She walked straight to his desk and placed the large sheet of paper on top of it, covering the barely begun letter. "No, too dark here," she said. Gloria picked up the sheet of paper before Neville had even had time to look down at it. She bounded over to the desk by the window and placed the paper down there.

"Come on," said Gloria, looking back at him with a wide grin. He never could resist that smile, not that he could resist her when she did not have a smile on her face either. Neville took her in before moving. Her hair hung in long curls around her shoulders, and it was so voluminous that it almost seemed to float in the air with a mind of its own. She had on a tight-fitting dress, and he could see the curves underneath. It did not take much to imagine exactly how she would look when unclothed. Even from across the room, her eyes sparkled a deep green that pierced the air, lighting up whenever he looked into

them.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked. “Come on, get over here, this is important.”

Neville finally got up from his chair. He did not know what he had done to deserve a woman such as Gloria, and he gave thanks every day for being blessed by her. She could have had any man, but she had chosen him. The Lord worked in mysterious ways, and he had never been more sure that there was a God. How else could he have captured this beauty and made her his own?

When he got to his wife, he did not look down at the paper, kissing her on the cheek instead.

“Oh, it is like that, is it?” asked Gloria. She turned her head and held it there, daring him to kiss her on the lips. It was a dare that Neville did not have to think very long about. He gently pressed his lips to hers, pulling away instantly before touching his lips to hers again. “You are the most beautiful woman in the land,” he said. “I cannot be happier than when I am with you.”

“Mmm,” said Gloria, leaning to kiss Neville before pulling herself away. “Your words are as sweet as honey.”

“And often they get me into messes as thick as honey,” he said.

Gloria laughed as Neville wrapped his arm around his wife and kissed her more fully this time. They came apart again and stood staring into each other’s eyes, bathed in the sunlight streaming in through the open window. The forests and lake were far below, behind Gloria. Even the land in which he lived was beautiful. Neville found himself waiting to wake from a dream or for someone to take it all from him and inform him that it had been given in jest.

His wife had laughed when he had told her that on their wedding night, and she assured him that she was not going anywhere. Her love for him was so deep that nothing and no one could drag her away

from her handsome Duke.

“You know,” said Neville. He held his wife tighter and glanced over to the bed. “I mean, we are both here, and there is nowhere that I would rather be.”

“We have all the time in the world,” she said, taking his hand and placing it on her heart. He could feel her heartbeat under her dress, and it was his tether. Whenever he needed to ground himself, she placed his hand on her chest, and he would feel her beating heart, counting the beats in his head until he smiled and removed his hand. The sound of her beating heart, or the feel of it, at least, was the most melodic sound in the world.

“What did you have to show me?” he asked.

Gloria’s smile widened into a large grin, and he could see her eyes light up like never before. “Have you seen this?” she started.

Neville looked down at the table and looked back up at his wife with a confused smile on his face. “Have I seen a map of the world? Why, I do believe that I have. What do they teach in school nowadays?”

“Hey,” said Gloria, slapping her husband playfully on the chest. “I know that you have seen a map before, but look at it, really look at it. What do you see?”

Neville looked down again, and he knew better than to try and make another joke. He looked back up at his wife with pleading eyes, hoping that she would tell him the answer.

“Possibilities!” shouted Gloria, widening her arms. “Look at all of these places. These are all places where we can go. Look at these names! Africa! The Black Sea! New Granada! Have you ever heard such things?”

“These are places that you want to go visit?” asked Neville, enjoying his wife’s enthusiasm.

“No, I am not saying that we should go and visit them, but...maybe we should. Would you not like to travel the world?”

“I would like to do anything with you, my love. Wherever you are is where my heart is, but why do we not start small. How about Scotland or France?”

“Everyone goes to Scotland and France,” said Gloria with a pout. “Though I have heard that Scotland is also a beautiful country, and the food in France is unlike anything that is made here. I would very much like to go to those countries too, but would you not like to go somewhere that no one else has been. I would love just to leave here and travel the world. It would be amazing, I know that it would.”

“How can I say no to you? If it were not for my duties here, I would take you to the Black Sea tomorrow.”

“Now you are making fun of me, and I do not think that is very nice,” she said. Gloria tried to pout again, but she could not help but smile.

“How about this,” said Neville. “Once we are settled in the Castle, and everything is running smoothly, I will take you to”—he closed his eyes and hovered his finger above the board, bringing it down decisively—“Hindostan.” Neville burst out laughing and slowly dragged his finger across the board until it resided on Portugal. “Portugal,” he said with glee.

“Hmm,” said Gloria. “It is a deal.”

“Why do you look so pleased with yourself?” he asked. “Why do I get a distinct feeling that you have tricked me.”

“I would have settled for France, you know.”

“I cannot believe that you would do this to me. The woman I love, and this is how she treats me.”

“I always get what I want,” she said, placing her hands on her waist.



“And, now, I want something else.” Gloria walked over to the door and closed it. She unhooked one of her shoulder straps and then the other. “Well, are you going to stand there, or are you going to help me out of this thing?” she asked.

Neville was at her side in an instant. She turned her back to him, and he obliged her by undoing the ties on the back of her dress. When they were all untied, the dress slipped to the floor, and she was left in her undergarments. Neville watched with his mouth hanging half-open as that dropped to the floor too.

Gloria walked slowly from him toward the bed, looking over her shoulder once as she did. Neville watched her, memorizing every tiny detail of her body. When she got to the bed, she crawled onto it and turned to lie on her back. She put her arms up behind her head and looked to where he stood rooted to the spot.

“I was hoping that someone was going to join me,” she said. “If you are not going to undress and warm me up, then I hope that you are going to find someone who will.”

Neville burst out into a deep laugh, quickly unbuckling his breeches. He kicked off his boots, flinging them against the wall, and his breeches almost went out the window when he threw them, draping themselves over the windowsill. He was more careful with his shirt, tossing it to the ground, and his underwear soon followed.

He moved to the bed and leaped onto it, causing Gloria to burst out laughing too. He turned over onto his side and pressed himself against his wife, wrapping one arm around her. She nuzzled into him, and he could feel the softness and warmth of her body.

“Do you believe that there is one person for everyone in this world?” asked Neville. His hand drew a line from her belly button up to her lips.

“I do not know,” Gloria responded.

“You do not know if there is someone for everyone, or do you think that there is more than one person for everyone?”

“I do not know for either question,” said Gloria.

“Finding you has helped me to realize that there is only one person for me. You have lit up my life in ways that I never imagined. When I am with you, I laugh more than I ever had before; I love more strongly; I am a better man because of you.”

“You were all those things before I met you,” said Gloria.

“No, I was not,” said Neville. “I am a better person when I am with you. And I hope that I make you a better person when you are with me.”

“You do,” said Gloria. “You are a good man, with or without me, but I am glad that we are together. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“I can make that happen,” said Neville. “We will travel together all over the world as a family.”

“You really mean it?” she asked.

“I mean it. As a family, we will go wherever we please.”

“Why are you saying it like that?” asked Gloria. She stared at Neville for a moment before it clicked. “Wait, are you saying what I think you are saying?”

“It is time, do you not think?”

“You want to start a family?” she asked.

“What better time than the present?” he asked, his hand roving over her body, causing her back to arch.

“I love you,” said Gloria.

“I love you too. We are going to have lots and lots of children—a large happy family, and we will traverse the world with our sons and daughters.”

“Tell me more,” she said.

“We can go everywhere. Russia, China, even the Black Sea. I will be happy no matter where we are, as long as you are by my side. We will have children, and we will spend the rest of our lives together.”

“Promise that I will spend the rest of my life with you?” asked Gloria.

“Promise.”

“Take me, Neville. Take me now!”

## Chapter 10

Julia stood with her back against the tree, finding it hard to breathe. She was overcome by emotion. She had never done anything like that before. Coming here today, she had visions of Maximilian and Sophia together, but instead, she found herself in a forest with the Duke of Edinbran passionately making out against a tree. She looked at the Duke standing in front of her and saw the passion in his eyes.

He was stronger than she had expected, lifting her up with ease and pinning her to the hard bark. She almost laughed as she stood panting and might have if she had been able to catch her breath. It was as if she were a teenager again, though she would not have dared imagine that she would have done something like that when she was younger. Julia stared at the Duke and waited for him to kiss her again—she knew that he wanted to.

Instead, he muttered that he was sorry and turned and walked away. “We should get back,” he said over his shoulder. “They will be arriving back with the boat soon.”

Julia’s heart turned from fire to ice. She did not understand this man. He had wanted to kiss her, she knew that, but he was acting as if he had been forced into it or he was embarrassed by it. That was when it hit her. He *was* embarrassed by it.

How could she not have realized it before? She was not a young woman anymore, and her body was proof of that. First, she had fainted in front of him, and then he had got his hands on her body. Julia started walking, following the Duke and struggling to keep up. She reached a hand around to touch her rear, suddenly self-conscious. She had always thought that she had maintained her figure, but she

was softening.

Then there was the kiss. She had not kissed anyone in over ten years, and before that, she had only kissed her husband and rarely as passionately as that. She was out of practice, she knew that, but had she ever really been a good kisser? She only had William to go by, and he certainly seemed to enjoy her kisses, but he was also the sweetest man in the world and loved her dearly.

Julia almost caught up to the Duke when the tears came. How could she have been so stupid to have thought that the Duke would be interested in her? Maybe he had been, but he had tried her out, and she had been found lacking. She fished the handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. The Duke could think what he wanted, but she would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her in tears. She wiped the last of the tears away and replaced the handkerchief.

They emerged from the forest, and she was a step behind him. The sun hit her, and she shielded her eyes as she adjusted to the light. Still, the Duke did not look at her. He continued to walk as if she was not there. When they got back to where they had sat and watched the boat leave, Neville sat back down as if nothing had happened.

Julia sat too, and when she looked at him, it was as if he was offended at what had just happened. His face was still red, and his eyes glared at the water. His mouth twitched as if he was about to say something, but he did not. Julia sighed. She wanted to reach out to him and console him, to apologize to him, but she knew that she had nothing to apologize for. If he was going to act like nothing had happened, then she was going to do the same.

“I would love some more fruit punch after our walk,” she said.

Neville took a breath before responding. “Of course.” He raised his hand and gestured for a footman to come over. He sent him back to the Castle to take back the punch that had warmed and bring out some more that was chilled. They both sat in silence until the refreshments were brought, and Julia sipped on the cold drink when it

was served up to her. Neville took some too.

It was almost twenty minutes of silence later when she saw the small boat approaching again. When they finally reached the shore, she could see the smiles on Maximilian and Sophia's faces. Julia let out a sigh and took a deep breath. She stood up as her son and the Duke's daughter walked back to where they were sitting, and from the way they were talking to each other, the meet had gone exceptionally well.

Julia found some solace in that and reminded herself of why she had come in the first place. The happiness of her son was much more important to her than her own happiness. The walk back to the Castle was different from the one out to the boat. Maximilian and Sophia engaged in vibrant conversation as they walked ahead while she and the Duke walked in silence. When they said their goodbyes, it was as if the afternoon had not happened for her.

"How did the boat ride go with Lady Sophia?" asked Julia.

"It was very fruitful," said Maximilian. "I believe that we will be seeing a lot of Lady Sophia and the Duke in the near future."

"That is good news," said Julia.

"Are you well, Mother? You look a little pale?"

"I felt faint earlier, but I am fine now. Do not worry about me, I will get through." She was glad that Maximilian and Sophia were becoming close, but she was not sure how much time she could spend in the presence of the Duke if this afternoon was anything to go by.

\* \* \*

Maximilian had gone to the city with Sophia, and that gave Julia a free afternoon. There was not a lot to be done around the house—there was plenty of staff for that, though she had told Maximilian that he had hired far too many, not that she did not like having a well-kept and efficient household, but it was not something that she was used

to. She and William had lived a modest life on his military salary, but that had changed once Maximilian had taken control of the finances.

Perhaps she would do some painting. The thought had only just lodged in her mind when she saw a carriage approaching. The window in the library gave a view all the way to the front gate. As the coach drew closer, she knew exactly who it belonged to, and her heart leaped into her mouth. The Duke must have come to talk about preparations for the wedding.

Julia quickly ran to the mirror to check herself—she wanted to look her best, just to prove to the Duke that she was not who he thought she was. She might be an old lady now, but she had dignity.

The knock at the door came soon after, and she heard the gentle steps of the butler. “Yes, she is in, Your Grace. I shall go and get her for you.”

“No need, Jenkins,” said Julia emerging from the library down the hall. “I am right here. Leave us, please.”

“Yes, My Lady.” He walked off quickly as Julia walked to the front door. She could see the Duke framed in the light, and he looked devilishly handsome as always. She silently cursed him for that. No matter how he had treated her, she still found herself attracted to him, especially after the kiss.

“Good day, Your Grace. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The Duke took a deep breath and looked from side to side. “I wanted to come here to apologize,” he said.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” Julia said. “You have been nothing but a gentleman, and your daughter and my son are getting on extremely well.”

“I do have to apologize,” he said. He took a step back and descended the stairs. “Will you come out here, please, so that I can give you



the...”

“The what? Your Grace.” Julia did not understand what was going on, but she followed him out of her house and down the steps to his carriage.

Neville reached inside the coach and produced a large bouquet of flowers. “These are for you,” he said. “I did not act like a gentleman the other day, and I need to apologize for that.”

“That is quite all right. I am the one—”

“No,” said Neville. “Please do not say that you had anything to do with it. I am the one who kissed you, and I acted uncouth after it. I walked away as if nothing happened.”

Julia looked down at her feet. She looked up when the Duke passed her the flowers. They smelled wonderful, and she could not help but stick her nose into them.

“The truth is that I did want to kiss you, and I am not ashamed to say that I enjoyed it.”

“You did?” asked Julia. She looked up at the Duke. “I mean...” she did not try to recover from her initial question. The fact that the Duke enjoyed the kiss did surprise her, but it filled her with confidence too.

“I did, very much so,” said Neville, his face reddening. “And I got you the flowers to apologize for my actions. And the chocolates.”

“Chocolates?” asked Julia.

“Yes, where are they?” Neville reached inside the carriage again, finally producing a large box of chocolates. Julia could see the packaging and knew that they were from the new French chocolatier. Neville held out the box and realized that Julia had her hands full. “Sorry, I can hold onto these for now.”

"I do not know what to say," said Julia. Everything that she had thought was being washed away by the Duke's words.

"And I bought you a dress," said the Duke.

"A dress?" Julia was barely able to stop herself from shouting the question.

"I might have gone a little overboard," said Neville. "I wanted to say that I was sorry, and I sometimes find that hard to do with words, so that is why I brought all of the peace offerings."

"How about you try some words now that you are here," said Julia, emboldened by the fact that the Duke had enjoyed kissing her.

Neville placed the chocolates back in the carriage and stepped forward. He put out his hand to touch Julia but quickly brought it back. "This is not easy for me," he started. "Not the words, all of this." He gestured with his hands between the two of them. "It has been a long time since I have done anything like this."

"That is the same for me," said Julia.

"I have a lot going on that holds me back, and there are some things that I just cannot talk about. I find myself attracted to you, Lady Julia, and I am sick of pretending that I am not. The truth is that I am afraid. When I kissed you, I felt emotions that I have not felt in years. I could not deal with it, and I ran. I should have stayed and kissed you again."

"Yes, you should have," said Julia.

"I should have," agreed Neville. "Oh, what am I doing. We do not have time for this."

Julia almost gasped as Neville stepped forward and took the flowers from her. He tossed them to the side, and her eyes widened. She did not have time to react before a hand wrapped around her waist, and

she was pulled into his hard body. His lips were on hers again, and she melted as they kissed.

## Chapter 11

“*I* do believe that our plan is working,” said Sophia. She glanced out of the window as the fields and meadows stretched out beside the carriage before looking back at Maximilian.

“He does not suspect anything?” asked Maximilian.

“He was happy,” said Sophia. “Yet, I am unsure whether he is happy because he believes the two of us are destined to be together or because he has the opportunity to meet with your mother.”

“You think that he will visit her?”

“He told me as much,” said Sophia with a smile. “He seemed positively eager to go to her and apologize for something, though he would not tell me what that was.”

“She did seem preoccupied with troubling thoughts.” Maximilian tapped his fingers on the cushioned seat of the coach. “Perhaps they had a falling out.”

“Oh, I do not think so,” said Sophia. “They will be perfect together.”

“And he knows not why you truly travel into the city?” asked Maximilian with a sly smile.

“Please do not tease me,” said Sophia. She looked down for a moment. She had never liked deceiving her father and had tried her very best never to do so, but this was different. If she came out with the truth, there would be no need to see Maximilian anymore, and that would mean that her father and Lady Julia would not have a chance to see

each other. She would not have to deceive him for long, she was sure of that, as soon everything would work itself out.

She looked over at Maximilian again. He was a handsome man, and he spoke eloquently and intelligently. He would make a fine husband for someone, but not for her. She was glad that he thought the same way, or she might fear that her father would insist on them being married. They would not have to pretend for much longer.

“What will you do in the city?” asked Sophia.

“There is a singer I have always wanted to see. She is from Italy and is starting to make a name for herself. I love opera, and I believe that she is going to be a star. Maria Romano.”

“I do not believe that I have heard the name,” Sophia said.

“And you may never.” Maximilian dropped his shoulders. “She comes from a common family, and she is not conventionally beautiful. Miss Romano may never make it in this city, but she is trying, and there is something beautiful about that.”

“Well, it would seem that we are both going to the city to meet someone special,” said Sophia.

“It’s not like that,” said Maximilian with a smile. Sophia smiled back. This was all coming together better than she could ever have hoped. Soon, her father and Maximilian’s mother would fall in love, and then she and Maximilian would be free to pursue love with a Baron and a singer. It was all starting to sound like a story from a fairytale.

The remainder of the coach journey was completed in comfortable silence, Sophia thinking of the Baron the entire way. They arrived soon after in London at the address that Baron Vassiley had managed to pass on to Sophia.

“I will take the coach and return in three hours,” said Maximilian.

“Thank you, again,” said Sophia. “You are doing a good thing, both for our parents and me.”

“Well, be off and do not waste your time,” said Maximilian.

The door to the carriage was opened, and Sophia stepped down to find Baron Vassiley waiting for her. He wore an immaculate jacket that looked freshly bought not two minutes before. It was dark blue and understated but changed hue in the light as he moved toward her to take her hand. His breeches were blacker than the night, and the white shirt under the jacket was without crease or blemish. The cravat was cream with hints of blue to match the jacket, and it had been tied more expertly than any other she had seen before. He wore his clothes with elegance and aplomb, but that was not Sophia’s favorite thing that he wore.

It was his smile. She could hear the carriage pull away behind her, the wooden wheels bumping over the cobbles, but it was lost amongst everything else, and she was lost in that smile. Baron Vassiley’s entire face lit up when he smiled, and Sophia almost felt like swooning.

“I was not sure that you would come,” the Baron said once the carriage had left. He winked at her, and Sophia felt weak again.

“Of course, I would come,” she said, breathing a little heavier. “I could not resist...” Sophia was not sure what she could not resist. The man himself or the secrecy of it all. Perhaps it was the two combined.

“Shall we walk?” asked Baron Vassiley, extending his arm. “I am glad to see that you have no lady’s maid with you. Are you sure that you trust being alone with a man in the middle of the city?”

“Well, I would not normally,” said Sophia, composing herself. “But you are not like most men, Lord Vassiley. I am sure that I can trust you.” She took his arm, and they began to walk.

“It is a beautiful day for a stroll with a beautiful woman,” he said.

“You say exactly what you mean with no beating around the bush, do you not, Lord Vassiley. This really is a beautiful place, but I cannot believe that you chose somewhere so open. We are not supposed to be seen together.”

“Do not worry,” said the Baron, “this is a park used by the common people. No one will recognize me here. We are free to do whatever we please.”

“It sounds as if you are suggesting we get ourselves into trouble,” said Sophia.

“Oh, I am sure that there will be lots of time for that.” Once again, the Baron smiled, and Sophia lost herself in his company. His eyes were bright and blue, his hair perfectly styled, and his entire manner was elegant and effortless as if he did not care how he looked and, at the same time, had a team who maintained his immaculate appearance.

Sophia had her arm linked with the Baron’s, and she placed her other hand atop his arm, feeling the muscle below. He was, perhaps, the finest man she had ever met. She had no doubt that her father would approve of their marriage when the truth came out.

The garden they walked through was small, but it was iridescent. The colors of spring were in full bloom, and reds and greens and blues competed to be the most dazzling. Other couples walked through the park, though none as well dressed as Baron Vassiley and Sophia. They all wore smiles on their faces, but Sophia was sure that they could not be as happy as she was at that moment.

“The man in the coach, is he the one your father wants you to wed?” asked Baron Vassiley.

“He is,” replied Sophia. “That was Maximilian. He is a fine man, but he is not...” Sophia was about to say ‘you,’ but she caught herself. “He is not the right man for me.” She did not want to talk about marriage yet with the Baron—this was only the second time that they had met.



“I am sure that you will know the right man for you when he comes along and sweeps you off your feet,” said the Baron.

“I am sure that you are right,” said Sophia.

They walked in silence again, and the Baron leaned down to smell one of the roses. After a quick glance from side to side, he plucked one of the smaller roses from the bush and turned to Sophia. She let go of his arm momentarily as he brushed the lock of hair behind her ear, slowly and tenderly caressing her cheek as he did so. Baron Vassiley took the rose and placed it in Sophia’s hair. He held her by the shoulders, and she thought for a moment that he was going to kiss her. She wanted him to kiss her. Their gazes locked for a moment before he turned away, leaving her wanting so much more. He held out his arm again, and she gladly took it.

The sun beat down from above, not a cloud in the sky. Birds flew across the blue expanse, some dipping down to land in the trees in the garden, chirping out a song before taking flight again.

“My father says that there is not much known about you,” said Sophia and immediately regretted it when the Baron’s arm tensed under her grip. “I am sorry, I did not mean...”

“Why would the man say such a thing?” asked the Baron.

“I do not know why I said that,” said Sophia. She was kicking herself for saying it and now felt that she had ruined the afternoon. “I only mean that if we are to... be together, my father would most likely want to get to know you better. I do not know what you do, but I trust you more than anyone before. Oh, I am not explaining this very well.”

“I am sorry,” said the Baron. “I had to build my reputation and have strived hard to keep it. When someone questions me, I get defensive, and I know that your father only wants the best for you. I have done well for myself, and that means that there are others who want to cut me down. I did not mean to react as I did. If your father needs to know, you can tell him that I ship goods from England to Scotland.

Fabrics, metals, and sometimes weapons—fencing equipment too.”

“Fencing equipment,” said Sophia. “My father will be most interested in that. He was teaching me fencing not too long ago.” She did not add that Maximilian was teaching her, too, feeling that it would not be appropriate.

“Well, perhaps we will have to go toe to toe sometime,” said the Baron, turning to face her and standing close. Once more, Sophia longed for the kiss that did not come. “But, for now, we need to keep our relationship cloaked in secrecy, do we not?” he added. “We will not forever, but I find it much more fun to do so.” The Baron touched her cheek again, this time with the back of his hand, and Sophia almost melted into his arms.

After the hiccup earlier, the rest of the afternoon passed most pleurably, though all too quickly. Sophia’s heart dipped when she saw the carriage pull up at the entrance to the park, but she knew that she must leave so as not to arouse suspicion. This time, the Baron did kiss her, though only on her hand. That was enough for now. They had all the time in the world to be together, and she had to focus on her father first.

“Will I see you again?” asked Sophia, worrying that she had put the Baron off.

“I will be counting down the minutes,” said Baron Vassiley.

Sophia could not contain her smile. The door to the coach was opened, and Sophia gave a small wave to the Baron before she boarded. She dropped herself down onto the seat with a contented sigh.

“It was even better than I had hoped,” said Sophia, already daydreaming of a future with the Baron. “Baron Vassiley is the perfect gentleman and a wonderful man. I cannot wait to start a family with him.” Sophia looked across at Maximilian with a puzzled expression. He had not said anything since she boarded the coach, and he sat

staring to a point behind her with a smile on his face.

“What has gotten into you?” asked Sophia.

Maximilian drew his eyes away from the spot behind her and locked his gaze. “I am in love!” he said. “I am in love, and I do not care who knows it. I would run away with her tomorrow if she even knew that I existed. She is my beautiful songbird!”

“Shh,” said Sophia with a giggle. “Then both of our afternoons went well. But, Maximilian, we must keep this a secret for now.”

“I will try,” he said, composing himself. “But, I do not know how long I can hold this in for.”

## Chapter 12

“*I* am sorry, I do not know what came over me,” said Neville.

That was the truth. He had not known what had come over him. He had come to apologize after how he had reacted, and he had wanted to kiss her again, but he had not intended to do so. When he had lurched forward and grabbed onto her, it was as if he was a different person.

But he had enjoyed the kiss; there was no doubt about it. He had enjoyed it, and he wanted it. He wanted to do it again, but his wife was stuck in his mind. Neville could still not betray her. He had promised to spend his life with her, and he had not been able to live up to that promise. He... did not know what to do.

“Your Grace?” The voice was small, but it woke him from his daydream. Everything felt weird. He had kissed her when he had not meant to, and now she was addressing him as ‘Your Grace,’ which made everything feel even weirder after they had kissed, and not just once. Now, they were sitting taking tea and sandwiches in the garden together, and it was extremely nice, which made him feel even more weird.

“I am sorry, Julia. I am being very rude when you are being an extremely gracious host.”

“That is quite all right,” she said, and he could see a look of disappointment on her face.

“These sandwiches are delicious,” said Neville, hoping to deflect from the unease that was growing between them. “I hope that Sophia and Maximilian are getting on well in London.”

"I am sure that they are enjoying each other's company," said Julia. "Though, I hear what you are saying. If we are to hope that your daughter and my son find love, we cannot let anything stand in their way."

"I did not mean to suggest...", said Neville, aware that she was talking about the two of them. He had not meant to suggest *that*, but it would be easier to lean into it. "I will do anything to ensure that Sophia has a good life. And I know that you will do the same for Maximilian. He is a fine boy."

"Yes, you are correct," said Julia. "We both would do anything for our children." Again, there was a look of disappointment on her face.

"Shall we take a walk?" asked Neville, still trying to remove himself from the situation that he found himself in. He was not sure how long he would be able to control himself around this woman after getting to taste her lips, but it was not fair to his deceased wife, and he continued to tell himself that.

"Yes, that would be pleasurable," said Julia.

Neville rose from the small table that had been set up on the veranda of the stately home, and Julia followed. He thought about putting out his arm for her to take, but he stopped himself. He hated the mixed messages he was giving her, coming over here with gifts and then kissing her only to follow that up with the cold shoulder.

He could see in her eyes that she wanted him and, deep down, he wanted her too, but she could not replace his late wife. No one could.

"Your gardens are very nice," said Neville.

"My gardener has been tending to the plants and flowers for years. He was hired by my late husband. He knows what he is doing."

"Your husband was an astute judge of character," said Neville. He wanted to mention his wife, to have everything come pouring out of

him. He was comfortable in the presence of this woman and wanted to tell her all, but then he would have to tell her the real reason why they could not be together. He still loved his wife, even after all these years. If Sophia and Maximilian did get wed, that would solve everything. Yet, he did not tell her about his wife. He did not know why.

“He was a good man,” said Julia. “It was hard when he passed. War can be a cruel thing.”

“I know that all too well,” said Neville.

There was a slight yelp as Julia caught her foot on a stray root. She fell forward and would have fallen if Neville had not sprung into action, grabbing her around the waist and chest to stop her fall. He held onto her tight, keeping one hand around her midriff and the other encompassing her breasts, and he lingered there even though he knew that he should not. Julia grabbed onto his arms and held them tight.

Neville could feel the soft plumpness of her breasts, and he longed to rip the dress from her and take her in his arms. His head was close to her neck, and he pushed his nose closer, smelling her scent. Julia had a sweetness, a mixture of honey and milk. He could see the creaminess of her neck and knew that he was unable to resist this woman. Before he could stop himself again, he kissed her on the neck.

Julia tensed a little in his arms, but it was through pleasure, and she gripped Neville’s arms tighter. He kissed her again on the neck, loosening his grip on her slightly to turn her around in his arms. He came face to face with her again, and he wanted her right there and then.

“You drive me wild,” he said.

“My Grace,” was all that Julia replied, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Neville found his lips traveling toward Julia's. His head said no, but his heart said yes, and his heart was winning. He kissed her again after vowing only minutes before not to do such a thing. But the passion took over. He moved his hands up to her head, cupping her face and sliding his tongue into his mouth. He felt like a teenager again—the feelings coming back that he had not felt for years.

Julia's hands traveled down his back, moving over his tight muscles. He could feel himself stirring, something that no woman had caused since his wife. He had wanted other women in the past, but none had caused him to feel like this.

Neville's tongue explored her mouth and was met by Julia's. He moved his head to the side, and she mirrored the movement. His hands moved down her sides, taking in every ounce of her, drawing out her curves. He gripped on tightly to her waist and moved his lips against hers, the passion falling. A moan escaped Julia's lips, and that only drove Neville on. He wanted her to moan a lot more than that.

Their lips came apart and the two of them flushed, breathing heavier. Neville took a moment to take her in again as if seeing her for the first time. He had been wrong. He could not stop himself from being with this woman. He did not know what that meant for Sophia and Maximilian, but he was unable to think straight. A glance down, and he took in the curves that he had felt during the kiss. On the front of the dress, there were buttons, and that is where his hands went.

He quickly unbuttoned the first two blue buttons, exposing the skin of her breast. His hand found the smoothness of her body, and he was about to move it from her breast when her hand came and held his to her body. He could feel her heartbeat, a quick pounding that matched his own. Neville kept his hand there and closed his eyes.

Suddenly, he was back in the past. He could see his wife—he was looking into her eyes. There was the familiar smell, the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin. Neville could feel her heartbeat, his hand on her chest, an act that he had done many times. She had always held his hand there, and it calmed him, comforted him. Neville



opened his eyes. His wife was gone.

“No!” he shouted. “What are you doing to me?” Neville quickly removed his hand and turned for her. If he were alone, he might cry, but he kept his tears to himself.

“What is wrong?” asked Julia. He felt her hand on his shoulder, and he quickly shrugged it off.

“Nothing,” said Neville, the anger inside building. “We cannot do this. My wife. Your husband.” Neville struggled to explain what was holding him back. He was scared of his own feelings and his betrayal. “Your husband died in the war,” he finally said.

“Yes,” said Julia, standing before him with her dress unbuttoned and a look of shame or guilt or embarrassment on her face.

He could not tell her that his late wife had done the exact same thing with his hand on her breast. It was too close, too personal. “I had a friend who died in the war,” he said, distracting himself from the truth once again. “I fought in the war too. Perhaps we fought together, I do not know. All I know is that I came back barely harmed, and my best friend did not come back at all.”

The fact that he had come back unharmed was a lie. He had not been physically injured save for a few scratches here and there, but the mental scars would live with him forever. How was it fair that bullets mostly missed him by the width of a hair, and his best friend had taken a stray bullet, not from a soldier.

“You poor man,” said Julia. She reached her hand forward but quickly withdrew it. Her face went red, and she quickly buttoned up her shirt, realizing that the moment had passed. “Death can be hard,” she added.

“He went to pull a child from the rubble,” said Neville, the talk of war distracting him from his true feelings—the constant pull between wanting this woman and not wanting to betray his wife. “A building

had come down, and he could hear the screams of a child. I told him that it was too dangerous to go out, but he could not let the child die. There are many horrors of war, but the loss of innocent life is the worst of them.”

“William would tell us stories when he came home from overseas,” said Julia. “All until he did not return.”

“How did he die?” asked Neville.

“They cannot be sure, the aftermath was such a mess, but they believe that he died in an explosion. I could not listen to what they were telling me. It could have been a bomb, an artillery shell, or something else. All I know is that he is gone.”

“My friend, we found out after, was shot by the child’s friend. He saw an enemy soldier and thought that he was going into the building to finish the job. Arthur was only trying to save the child, and the friend wanted the same thing. If only we could have talked. Now, Arthur is dead, and the child, possibly an adult now, will have to live with killing someone for the rest of his days. I do not know who came out of the situation worse.”

“You have been through a lot,” said Julia. “I am sorry for the things that you have seen.”

Both of them had calmed their breathing. The moment had well and truly passed, aided by the war story that was true in its entirety. But it was not the reason for Neville’s abrupt stop. He had promised his wife that he would be with her forever, and he was breaking that promise.

## Chapter 13

Julia looked at Neville and could see the pain in his eyes. She wanted to take him in her arms, both to comfort him and to feel the same passion that she had felt only moments ago, but two things stopped her. She knew that Neville did not want that, and she could not put herself through this anymore. The Duke had kissed her more than once now, and each time he had recoiled from it for one reason or another. Her heart could not take it any longer.

“We should return to the house,” said Julia. “I think that I heard a coach. Maximilian will be returning. I would like to ask him how his date went. They do make a good match, your daughter and my son.”

“Yes, they do,” murmured Neville. “Julia, I....” He did not finish his thought and held his arm out instead.

Julia took the arm, but there was no emotion there—from either of them. It felt like an ending to things, and Julia knew that the Duke was right. If something did happen between the two of them, it would stand in the way of a future for Sophia and Maximilian. The Duke was right to pull back. He was thinking of their children while she was only thinking of herself. She did want the Duke, but it was not the right thing to do.

When they reached the house, Julia saw that it was Maximilian’s coach. He stepped out with a large smile on his face.

“Oh, Maximilian,” said Julia. “Did you have a good time?”

“It was truly splendid, Mother. I had a wonderful afternoon.”

“I am most glad to hear that. Oh!” Julia was not expecting Sophia to still be in the coach, and she alighted too. “Lady Sophia, what a pleasant surprise.”

“I am glad to see you looking well,” said Neville, releasing Julia’s arm.

“I am well, Father, thank you. I had an enjoyable afternoon with Maximilian. And did you have a pleasant afternoon with Lady Julia?”

“Yes,” said Neville. Julia could hear the hesitation in his voice, but she did not think that Sophia picked up on it.

Sophia looked across at Maximilian and smiled. “Well, why do we have to cut short the day? If we are all enjoying each other’s company, why do we not enjoy some supper together?”

“Oh, Lady Sophia, I am afraid that I do not have food to feed us all.”

“Nonsense,” said Sophia. “We have enough food, do we not, Father? Maximilian and Lady Julia are welcome to dine with us?”

Neville looked over at Julia as if looking for some sort of signal, but she did not know what to say. “If you and Maximilian would like to spend some more time together, then I do not think that I can say no.”

“Shall Maximilian and I ride together, and you and Lady Julia can share a coach too?”

“No, I need to talk with you,” said the Duke of Edinbran. “There is your future to consider, Sophia.”

“Of course, Father,” said Sophia. “We can go on ahead in this coach and make sure that the help has food ready for our guests. You will follow soon, Maximilian?”

“We will,” he said. “Mother, I will order the butler to ready a carriage for us.”

“Yes, that will do just fine. Your Grace, thank you for having us. We will follow behind. I must change into something more formal for dinner,” said Julia.

Neville bowed slightly in her direction and left with Sophia. Julia did not need to change, but she could still feel the Duke’s hands on her, and the image of him unbuttoning her dress flashed in her mind. She needed to change into another dress—a fresh start for the day, even though the day was wearing on.

When she had changed and returned downstairs, Maximilian was waiting for her. Julia did not want to spend more time with the Duke, but she was willing to do it for her son. She wanted him badly and would never be able to have him—he was her forbidden fruit.

“Please tell me about your afternoon,” she said when she had followed Maximilian into the coach, trying to sound as upbeat as she possible.

“It was wonderful, Mother. One of the most splendid days that I have seen in the city.”

“And what did the two of you do, if I may ask?”

“The two of us?”

“Yes, you and Lady Sophia.”

“Yes, of course,” replied Maximilian. “We, uh, walked in the park, and then I took her to see an opera singer from Italy. She was amazing.”

“Lady Sophia or the singer?” asked Julia.

“Lady Sophia, of course. The singer was good, too, but it was Lady Sophia I was there with. But what about you, Mother? You seem to be spending a lot of time with the Duke of Edinbran.”

“Well, of course, I am. We have to if you and Lady Sophia are to be wed. There is a lot to arrange.”

“Yes,” said Maximilian before falling silent. After a moment, he said, “Mother.” But he fell silent again, and a gloominess invaded the carriage. Julia looked over at her son and decided not to probe any further. She did not want to talk either.

As if the weather outside was mimicking her mood, dark clouds moved in overhead, and a slight chill ran through the air. Julia was glad that she had brought her shawl and wrapped it tighter around her body. She wished that the Duke was there to wrap his arms tightly around her, but she quickly shook the thought from her mind. Maximilian sat opposite her with a look of happiness and sadness both at the same time. She knew exactly how he felt.

When they arrived at Edinbran castle, footmen were there to meet her and Maximilian, and they had parasols to shield them from the rain. Julia found Neville and Sophia inside, and it seemed as if Sophia was the only happy one among the four of them. She welcomed Maximilian immediately, and Julia was at least happy that they were destined for a future together even if she was not with the Duke.

She was not looking forward to being around once the two children were married—she would constantly be thinking about him. He was her forbidden fruit; something which she could not have no matter how much she longed for it. It did not help that he had also changed into more formal wear and looked incredibly dashing because of it. Perhaps just a taste, she thought.

No, she could not do it. She wanted to, but she could not take any more rejection. The Duke of Edinbran beckoned them into the dining room, and the pitter-patter sound of the rain outside grew in volume. Julia wanted to run outside and soak herself in the rain to cool off. She was acting like a teenager and not the mature woman that she was.

“Thank you again for having us for supper, Your Grace,” said Julia. “Whatever is cooking sure does smell delicious.”

“You are most welcome, Lady Julia.”

There was a formality to the exchange that did not match their previous interaction that day. She followed as Neville led them all into the dining room, where the staff was waiting to seat them. When they were all sat at the table, Sophia and Maximilian on one side of the large table and Julia and Neville on the other, wine was offered and accepted by all. Julia took a small sip and felt the sweet taste calm her nerves. She reminded herself of why she was truly doing this.

“About earlier,” Neville whispered, glancing quickly across the table to where Maximilian and Sophia were engaged in whispered conversation. “I did not—”

“It is fine, Your Grace. Let us be a support for our children and help to guide their way.” As soon as she finished the sentence, a flash of light lit up the room, followed by a deep growling thunder. Julia jumped in her chair and found the Duke’s hand on her back, removed just as quickly as it arrived.

The butler walked promptly into the room and over to the Duke, whispering in his ear. Neville nodded and looked at the three sat around the table. “Rogers has informed me that the storm has brought a wicked wind that has already felled two tree branches on the estate and is whipping the horses into a frenzy. I do not think it wise that you return in the coach until the storm subsides. I will instruct the guest rooms to be made up should they be needed.”

“A wonderful idea, Your Grace,” said Maximilian, more buoyant than he was in the coach. “We would be happy to stay, would we not, Mother?”

“I do not think that we have a choice,” she said.

“It will be our pleasure to stay, Your Grace,” added Maximilian.

Lightning struck close by again, followed a moment after by the growl of thunder. Julia jumped in her chair again, but no comfort came from the Duke this time. After that, the night passed pleasantly with Maximilian and Sophia doing most of the talking. The Duke and Julia

took a back seat as if in secret agreement that they should let the next generation provide the entertainment.

The storm did not let up and only grew worse as the evening came to a close. More wine was drunk, and the four succumbed to sleepiness. When it was time for bed, Maximilian was led by the butler to his room, and Julia was led by a maid to hers. Help was offered, but Julia did not accept it—she was not sure if she would manage to sleep anyway.

Lightning struck again and again, her room lighting up each time, but she eventually grew used to it, listening out for the thunder which came later and later after each illumination. The rain continued to pour heavily, and the wind stirred up the trees in the darkness.

Julia did not remove her dress and lay on top of the bed, unable to sleep. She was not sure what drove her out of bed and the room, but her legs were restless, and she decided to walk the halls while everyone slept. She kept her footsteps light as she moved through the castle, not wanting to disturb anyone. There may have been some staff around, but she did not see anyone as she walked. Still, the lightning came.

She was about to turn around and head back to her room when a noise caught her attention. It almost sounded like a mouse squeaking, or perhaps someone having trouble breathing. Curiosity got the better of her, and she walked toward the sound, rounding a corner.

There was a light coming from a room, and she should have turned away, but she did not. It sounded as if someone was crying, and she knew that whoever it was needed help. She steeled herself and continued on, the light emanating from the room in flickers. As she got closer, she could hear the muted sobs, and her heart almost broke. She stopped at the door and listened for a second more.

She could not turn away and moved into the doorway, unnoticed at first. At the far end of the room, with his knees up to his chest and back against the wall, was the Duke. He continued to sob, still not



noticing Julia at the door. His shoulders jerked up and down constantly, and his eyes were fixed on the portrait of the young lady on the floor.

Julia moved into the room, and Neville finally realized that she was there, letting out a small gasp. He put his hand up as if to stop her, but she could not be stopped now. She moved quickly to him and slumped down onto the floor, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him in close. Neville broke down in tears as if he could not hold them in any longer.

Neville went upstairs after dinner, disappointed with himself.

He had treated Julia poorly and had been unable to apologize to her or show her that he was sorry. He wanted to tell her everything, but he was ashamed. He had betrayed the love of his life by kissing another woman multiple times, and not only that, but he was only creating problems for his daughter. If she and Maximilian were not perfect for each other, then it might be different.

Neville lay in his bed and could not sleep. The sound of the rain outside was hypnotic, and he enjoyed the sound of the thunder, but it did not lull him to dreams. After tossing and turning for too long, unable to get his late wife out of his head, he dressed himself in his breeches and shirt and left for his study.

The castle was quiet, and it provided some welcome relief. He took the long way around to his study, wandering the stone hallways and taking in the art on the walls as much as he could with the stub of a candle that he was using to light the way. Throughout the day, he would walk past the paintings without studying them, but he found that he took them in more in the flickering light.

There were multiple previous occupants of the castle—many Dukes and Barons, along with heroes from various wars. Arthur was not up there. Neville moved on quickly as he thought of his friend. He could not help but think of Julia, too. He had used his friend as an excuse to distance himself from her, and he did not like that he had. He was starting to feel that he was not a real man. He wanted her, and he could have her, but he could not do it. He could not betray the ones he loved. The ones he still loved.

Neville went straight to his study. He intended to catch up on his correspondence, but he was lying to himself when he thought that. His body took him to the desk, and he opened it on instinct, fishing out the portrait of his young wife shortly before she passed away. He stared at it, tears coming to his eyes.

“Why did you have to go?” he asked. “Why did you have to leave me? I cannot live without you.” Neville held the painting in his hand and stumbled back against the wall, sliding down it. He dropped the portrait to the floor and drew his knees up to his chest. He felt like a failure. He had lost his wife and lost a chance at finding someone else.

The tears came thick and fast, and he did not try to hide them, not caring if any of the staff were wandering the halls. Suddenly, there was movement, and he looked up to see Julia approaching him. He tried to stop her, but she was by his side in the blink of an eye, and he felt her warm embrace and let himself be pulled into her softness.

He could not stop himself from crying as he held her. The thought of his wife, how he had treated Julia, the death of his friend, the remnants of war in his mind, the betrayal, the ecstasy he had found in the arms of another woman, the desire for his daughter to be happy, and the emotions that came with all of that. It was all too much, and he could feel the tears flowing down his cheeks, wetting his shirt and probably wetting Julia’s dress too.

The more he cried, the better he felt. He was releasing the pent-up emotion for his dead wife, something that he had never allowed himself to do. The weight that was constantly on his chest melted away, and he wrapped his arms around Julia, holding her as tightly as she was holding him. He was not sure how long they sat in each other’s arms, but the crying eventually stopped, and his body stilled. He could not be sure if he was done crying or if there were no tears left.

“You must forgive me,” he said, moving his body slightly so that he could take his handkerchief from his pocket. He pulled away from Julia and wiped his eyes. “Do not look at me. I am not a man.”

“You are more of a man than any other man I know,” said Julia. “To keep your emotions hidden inside is not healthy, and real men do not let their emotions control them; they control the emotions. William often cried, especially when recounting the horrors of war. It helped to keep him sane.”

“I do not feel very sane,” said Neville. He blew his nose and chuckled to himself. He did not want a mirror for fear that he truly did look grotesque. “Why did you come here tonight?”

“To your study?”

“I do not know. To the castle, to the study, to me? You should run as far away from me as possible. I will only hurt you.”

“Why do you think I came?” she asked. The response sat between them for a few moments before she added, “I could not sleep, and I heard you in distress. I did not know that it was you until I got to the room, but I knew that you needed help.”

“After you have seen me like this, you must think me a joke.”

“I think that you care for people very deeply. Was this your wife?” she asked, picking up the portrait from the floor.

Neville almost reached out to stop her. “Yes, it is.”

“She was very beautiful.”

“She was,” Neville said. “She was so young. I cannot believe that she is gone.”

“It is never easy,” said Julia. She reached out and took Neville’s hand, squeezing it tight. “I can still remember the day that they told me William had died. They never recovered his body, but we still had a funeral for him. There is only an empty coffin in the cemetery. I still feel silly for doing that.”

“That is far from silly. You were remembering the man in the best way you could, and I am sure that it brought you some comfort too. I would have done the same in your situation.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Julia. “We do things that we do not usually do when it comes to the death of a loved one.”

“Please, do me one favor, Julia.”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Please do not call me ‘Your Grace.’ It does not sound right. Neville is a much better fit.”

“I will try, Neville.”

Neville smiled at her using his real name. He liked most people to address him with the proper title, but after what the two of them had been through, first names seemed more fitting. “I cherished my wife more than anyone in the world. I still do. Except for my daughter. It is hard to let go of the past, of the people who you loved.”

“It is,” said Julia, pausing for a moment. “But it needs to be done. I am not saying that we forget them, but we need to move on from them. I loved William more than anyone in the world, and I love him still. No one will ever replace him, but I do not want anyone to replace him. If I find love again, it will be different. It will be new, not a competition with the man who was once my companion. I do not want the same thing with another man, but I do crave the love and companionship of another man. I fear that my words are not making much sense.”

“Perhaps not to those who have not experienced what we have. I know what you mean, Julia, and I also know that I have not yet let go of the past, but you make me want to try. I have held into my wife’s memory for twenty years, and I vowed that I would never love another woman. Part of me wants to honor her in the best way that I know, and that means not loving another woman again. Part of me

does not want to love another so that I do not have to go through the same thing again. I cannot bear to love someone and lose them again.”

“It is hard,” said Julia. “Death is a part of life, and there is nothing that we can do about that. The question is, are we going to allow ourselves to be scared and unhappy, or are we going to risk our happiness to feel alive again? I know what William would want me to do, and I hear his voice every day telling me to go out there and be happy.”

“I am sorry, Julia.”

“Whatever for?” she asked.

“I have been a fool. You have been nothing but truthful and gracious to me. Three times, I have taken what I want from you and pushed you away soon after.”

“Do you not think that I wanted it too?”

Neville smiled again. “It warms my heart to hear that, it really does. I only pushed you away because I felt that I was betraying my wife. I know that it is stupid, but I felt that I was being weak by kissing another woman. It has been twenty years, and you are the first woman I have kissed since she died. There are other women who have caught my eye, but none who have driven me as crazy as you have. I think that it is time for me to think about my own happiness. I do believe that she would have wanted that for me.”

“This is a decision that we cannot take lightly,” said Julia. “Maximilian and Sophia are to be wed, are they not? If we act on our feelings, do we put their future in jeopardy?”

“I thought that I wanted nothing more than for my daughter to be happy and find a man, but, ever since meeting you, there has been one thing that I have wanted more than that. I do not know what the future holds or how we will handle this, but we can keep it between us for now. No one needs to know, and when our children marry, you

can move into the castle with me. We can be together without troubling Maximilian and Sophia.”

“A secret relationship,” said Julia with a smile.

Neville laughed. “She made me laugh too. I feel that I have been hiding that side of me, but you are unlocking it. I choose my happiness, Julia. I choose my happiness, and that means that I want to be with you. Really be with you. I have feelings for you, Julia, and I am not ashamed to admit it.”

“And, I have feelings for you, Neville. I have had them since I first met you.”

Neville got to his feet. He picked up the portrait of his late wife and took it back over to the drawer. As he closed the drawer, he felt as if he was finally finishing a long chapter of his life. Lightning struck once more, lighting up the room and Julia. She was beautiful when illuminated briefly and beautiful in the flickering candlelight too.

The Duke took her in for a moment more, seeing the passion reflected in her eyes. He strode across the room, took her in his arms, and kissed her. This time, he knew that there was going to be no regret, guilt, or anger. There was only a bright new future.

His kiss felt different. Neville had been holding back before, his thoughts partly on his deceased wife, but he did not hold back anymore. He committed himself and gave his body to Julia, and he could feel her doing the same. The rain poured outside the window, and there was a coldness that came through the crack, but that was ward off by the heat created by the two late-night explorers—each exploring the other with their mouth and hands.

Neville tasted this exquisite woman in front of him. “Mmm,” he moaned as he kissed her. There was a flash outside followed by a rumbling of thunder, and that drove him on, his hands roving over her body. He could not contain the passion within him now that it had been unleashed. He could feel the same from Julia, too, her hands roving over his body and grabbing onto him.

He ran his hands through her thick brown hair, pulling her head into his so that she would not be able to escape, not that she was showing any signs of wanting to. He moved his fingers through her hair, one hand cupping the back of her head and the other working its way down to caress her neck.

Julia gave herself to him willingly, Neville’s tongue probing her mouth and her own responding to it. There was pushing, darting back, and serpentine motions as she playfully teased his tongue and pushed against it. The sweetness was on her lips again, and Neville could taste honey once more, mixed with the wine that had been consumed earlier. They came apart from each other if only to breathe. Heavy pants came from both of them before smiles reached both of their faces.



“I have not done that in a long time,” said Neville.

“I have not either,” said Julia.

Neville took the hand from her hair and brought it around to her face, touching the few freckles on her nose and cheeks. “You are very beautiful,” he said.

“You make me blush. Make me blush and feel beautiful,” said Julia, placing a hand on his chest.

“I thought that I could resist you, but now I see that I was foolish in that thought. No one and nothing could stop me from taking you right now.” He had finally let go of the past and was committing himself to the future.

“I am yours to take,” said Julia. She smiled again. “Truth be told, I have not felt passion like this in my life. Galloping horses could not drag me from you.”

The rain continued to fall outside, and the room was only one floor from the ground, allowing the smell of wet grass to enter the room. There was also some humidity from the rain, or perhaps the steaminess came from within the room. It made Neville want to undress, but before he did so, he helped Julia out of her clothes.

She did not resist when he started to unbutton the front of her dress, exposing the top of her breast as he had done previously. He placed his hand there and moved across the soft skin, but he did not linger, and she did not bring her hand up this time to hold his there. Neville moved in and planted another kiss on her lips before spinning her around.

The ties on the back of the dress were tight, but Neville found them easy to untie. When they were all undone, he let the dress fall to the floor, and he turned Julia back around to face him. She was wearing a sleek chemise, and he could see her curves underneath in the pale moonlight. His eyes were eager to see more and his hands were eager

to touch, his mouth ready to taste, but he savored the moment first.

Julia put her arms in the air as Neville pulled up the chemise and slipped it over her head. She looked down at the floor as Neville's eyes roamed her body. Her skin was cream poured from a bottle. It glowed in the moonlight, making her look like a goddess, at least, in Neville's eyes. She was short and curvy but not plump, though her breasts were full and had kept their shape despite her age. Neville stared at her nipples and wanted to reach out and grab them, but he was nervous too. It had been a long time since he had done this.

"I do not know the last time I was naked in front of a man," said Julia. There was a slight tremor in her voice, and it was obvious that she was a lot more nervous than he was.

"You are wondrous, Julia. You are the sight that I have longed for all these years. You truly are more beautiful than I had ever imagined. I cannot begin to comprehend this beauty that I see before me. Milky white skin that I want to run my fingers over, breasts like the rolling English hills, lips as pink as the roses in my gardens, and eyes that enchant. The fire inside of me has long withered to embers, but you have fueled my passion, and I cannot stop it."

Julia looked up at Neville, and he could feel a stirring in his breeches once again. Her body aroused him, but it was her eyes and her stare that enraptured his heart. As if emboldened by his comments, she looked down at her own body and then stepped forward to unbutton Neville's shirt. As soon as the buttons were released, she placed both of her hands on his chest, moving them up and down through his thick hair.

Neville had continued to fence, and he was not one to shy away from hard work, and that had maintained his body for him. He had a broad chest, muscular shoulders, and an almost flat stomach. He relished Julia's touch and took her hands in his to move them across his pectorals and shoulders before removing his hands and removing his shirt. He stepped forward into her, pushing his muscular chest against her plump breasts, enjoying the skin-on-skin contact.

“You make me feel like a woman again,” said Julia. She reached her hands around to rub them up and down his back, which was more muscular than his chest.

Neville cupped his hands around Julia’s fleshy rear and could feel his member throbbing in his underwear. It was not the time to release himself and be with Julia carnally, but he did want to pleasure her. With a swift movement, he lifted Julia up in the air. She let out a short gasp and then a giggle before wrapping her legs around him. He continued to hold her by her behind, enjoying the voluptuous flesh.

The Duke took a look around and realized that his desk was cluttered. He chuckled to himself before placing Julia gently down on her feet. He moved quickly to the desk and pushed his arm across it, knocking off the papers and ink in one fell swoop. That caused another laugh to come from Julia, and Neville quickly surveyed the mess on the floor and realized the noise that he had made. He moved to the door and pushed it shut, locking it.

Julia waited patiently for him, and he returned promptly to lift her up again, taking the opportunity to sink his fingers into her delicious flesh. Each time he touched her, he wanted her more, and he could barely contain the excitement in his trousers.

“I am about to burst,” Julia whispered.

Neville lowered her onto the table. Lightning struck again, followed by a faraway burst of thunder, and the rain had slowed. A tree in the vicinity of the castle window must have contained an owl, for it hooted, but no reply came. The owl had not found its mate, but Neville had found his.

They kissed again, this time slowly, savoring the moment. It had been twenty years since Neville had kissed someone, let alone ran his hands over a naked body. The feeling was familiar and new all at the same time. It was exciting and welcome. He remembered his wife and their time together, but it did not get in the way. He had enjoyed Gloria, and now he was enjoying Julia. They were both beautiful women, and

he had feelings for both of them.

Neville hesitated for a moment. He had feelings for Julia, but they were not the same as what he had felt for his wife. This was lust, and his past feelings were love; he was sure that was the case.

Julia's hands were on his back, pulling him in, and he realized that he had wandered off. Neville came back to the present, pulling away from Julia again to admire her curves and body. He thought himself a lucky man for being here with her. He could not stop his hands from reaching out to touch her. They cupped her breasts, his fingers moving lightly over her nipples. They moved up to her neck, her ears, her cheeks. Then, they were down on her midriff, the flesh juicy and ample, but not overly so. She was all woman.

In return, she moved her hands over his back and shoulders, and when he sunk his face into her breasts, she gripped onto the back of his head and pulled him into her flesh.

Neville had to pull away from her breasts. His lips wanted to meet hers again, and they could not wait. As soon as he looked into her eyes again, he ravished her lips with his own. As he kissed her, his hands moved from her stomach to between her legs. His fingers gripped onto her thighs, and he pushed her legs apart on the deck.

A moan escaped Julia's lips as her legs were pushed apart, and she dug her nails into his back as he moved his fingers to her wetness. Neville found her to be extremely wet, and that excited him more. He could not help but explore with his fingers, using both hands to pleasure her. Julia's body pulsed as he touched her, and her tongue moved faster with his.

Neville slowed as her body vibrated and then quickened his touch as her body stilled. It only took moments for the Duke to bring her to a climax, and she moved her mouth away from his to arch her back and throw her head back. She let out another moan, a longer, deeper one, and brought her hand up to her mouth to stifle the sound. The Duke could feel her entire body vibrate, especially between her legs, and he

moved his fingers in slow circles as she climaxed.

Julia threw herself forward and wrapped herself around Neville, arms around his back and legs around his middle. She gripped on tight with both. Neville wrapped his arms around her, the sweat dripping down his back but the cool breeze from outside cooling him. He could feel the rise and fall of Julia's chest as she calmed her breathing and the thumping of her heart as it beat as fast as it could.

"Well, that was surprising," whispered Julia into the Duke's ear. "When I decided to take a walk tonight, I did not think that I would be doing this."

"I never expected it either, but I am glad that you found me. You talked about me making you feel like a woman, but you make me feel like a man. I have not felt like this in quite some time."

"Then we make a good match for each other. We will keep our relationship a secret for now until our children are living happily, and then we can decide what to do next. I am so very glad to have met you, Neville."

"I have carried grief and guilt for so long, but I feel both of them slipping away. I have grieved for too long, and you have shown me that I have nothing to be guilty for. This night begins a beautiful new chapter in our lives."

"And I hope that it is one of many more," said Julia.

"I know that it will be," said Neville. "As you already know, I cannot resist you."

“*M*aximilian has asked to speak with me this afternoon,”

announced Neville over breakfast. “I do believe that he wants to move forward with the wedding. I cannot think of what else he might talk to me about. The two of you have been spending a lot of time together of late.”

“I could say the same for you and Lady Julia,” said Sophia.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Neville, almost choking on his tea. “We only spend time together because the two of you do. What would you have me do? Ignore the poor woman when she and her son come around for supper or tea?”

“Do you ever think about remarrying, father?” asked Sophia.

Neville put down the marmalade-covered toast that he had just raised to his lips. “Where is this coming from?” he asked. “How about we concentrate on finding you a husband, and then we can talk about me. I loved your mother, and that was enough love for a lifetime. Now, will you please finish your breakfast and no more foolish questions?”

“They are not foolish, Father. I know that you married your true love. You found love at first sight, and I only want that too. Is it not fair to ask for as much?”

“I really have no idea what you are trying to say, Sophia, but you will have a lot of love in your life. I love you dearly, and it is clear that Maximilian has taken a liking to you too. You two will be married, and you will give Lady Julia and I wonderful grandchildren.”

“You make it sound as if the two of you are a couple,” said Sophia with a smile. There was a rap at the front door, and it echoed through the halls.

“Sophia, please. Will you stop this silly talk. I am trying to have a serious conversation with you about the future, and you are only making a fool of yourself.”

“Father, I only want for you to be happy. You worry so much about me and think little of your own happiness.”

Neville thought on that as he took a bite of the toast. It had only been a couple of nights ago that he had very much been thinking of his own happiness and had been with Julia in his study. The thought brought a smile to his face, and he quickly removed it when he saw the look Sophia was giving him. He sipped at his tea and returned her stare as she became more serious and solemn.

“Father,” she started, but she did not get to finish. The butler appeared in the doorway, and Sophia ceased talking.

“Your Grace, Master Maximilian is here to see you. He is waiting in the library. Should I direct him to the breakfast room?”

“No, I believe that he will want to talk to me alone. Let the young man know that I will be with him immediately.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The butler turned sharply and returned the way that he had come.

“I believe that we both know the question that he has come to ask,” said Neville as he rose from his chair.

“Father,” Sophia said again, but she did not have anything to add, and Neville shook his head slightly as he left the room. Maximilian coming to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage was wonderful news, even if it did complicate things between him and Julia. His daughter’s happiness always came first.

“Maximilian,” he said as he entered the library and found Maximilian with his back to him, staring out of the window.

“Your Grace,” said Maximilian, turning and walking quickly over to the Duke. He held out his hand, and the Duke shook it eagerly. If it were not for Maximilian, he would not have met with Julia and got to know her better, and if it was not for the storm, he would not have seized his opportunity, as embarrassing as it was, though that embarrassment opened him up to the possibility of his own happiness.

“I will not take up too much of your time, Your Grace; I know how valuable it is.”

“Nonsense,” said Neville. “I have time for you, Maximilian, and that is because of how happy you make my daughter.”

“That is what I wanted to come and talk to you about, Your Grace.”

“I remember being in your exact position,” said Neville. “I was extremely nervous too.”

“I am nervous, but I do not think that our reasons are the same.”

“Well, out with it,” said Neville, suddenly unsure and intrigued as to what the young man was doing here.

“I cannot marry your daughter,” said Maximilian.

It took a moment for the words to sink in, and Neville thought for a moment that he had misheard the young man. He took a step back, and his eyes moved wildly over the room, looking perhaps for Sophia to jump out and announce that it was all one big joke.

“It would not be fair to her, or to you, Your Grace. We have continued with our charade for far too long, and if you speak with Sophia, I believe that you will find comfort in the truth.”

“Speak to her about what?” asked Neville.



“The truth is that we know about you and my mother. We have known for some time, and ever since we stayed here a few nights ago, I do not think that I have seen her happier. For that, I must thank you, Your Grace. It has not been easy for her since my father died.”

“But that does not mean that you and Sophia cannot marry,” said Neville, hoping to change the subject quickly away from Julia. “The two of you are a perfect match.”

“That may be,” said Maximilian, “but I am not in love with her, and she is not in love with me. It is important to Sophia that she finds someone who she can love and who can love her as much as you and your wife loved each other. I am sorry to say, Your Grace, but you are a tough act to follow. I am also in love with someone else.”

“Someone else?” asked Neville. “Who?”

“It does not matter, Your Grace. What matters is that Sophia and I both want to marry other people.”

“Other people? Sophia has found someone else?”

“I did not mean that, Your Grace. I only mean when the time comes. I misspoke. When I am nervous, I have the tendency to say the wrong thing. Please do not think worse of me or my mother, Your Grace.”

Neville could not think worse of Julia if he tried. Inside, a part of him was rejoicing that he would be able to be with Julia without any complications. Still, while they had found each other, and Maximilian had found someone else, Sophia was all on her own again, and he could not take that.

“Thank you for your honesty,” said Neville.

“Please talk to Sophia too, I am sure that everything will be fine,” said Maximilian.

“I do not know what to think,” said Neville. He held on tightly to Julia’s hand as they walked down the London street. The coach could have taken them to the entrance, but Neville wanted to walk part of the way to clear his head. “I talked with Sophia after Maximilian visited, and she was most calm about the situation. She told me that she had never thought of marrying your son. I thought that they were such a fine match. She told me that they were waiting until the two of us were together so that they would not have to pretend anymore.”

“And that worked,” said Julia. She gave Neville’s hand a squeeze.

“I mean, yes, but that is not the point. What is going to happen to my daughter? Your son told me that he is in love with someone else.”

“He told me the same, though he has not told me who she is. I did not know that he had met with anyone else except for your daughter.”

“I do not know what to do with Sophia anymore. I fear she may be hiding something from how she was talking. Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

Julia stopped, and Neville stopped too. “Sometimes life is just complicated,” she said. “You have faced worse complications, and more will come. You will deal with them as you have before, and you have me now too.”

“Thank you,” he said. Things did feel a lot less complicated when Julia was around.

“Perhaps I know what she is hiding,” said Julia. “When the four of us have been together, she and I talked at length about education. I feel that she might put more value on learning than finding a husband.”

“Nonsense,” said Neville. “She only thinks that because she is young. She would have been happy with Maximilian, but now I will have to find her another eligible suitor. I only want the best for my daughter; I really do.”

“We are here,” said Julia.

Neville took a deep breath and looked up at the wrought-iron gate. St. Cuthbert’s Cemetery were the words molded into the iron. The Duke had come here a lot to visit his wife, but this time, it felt different.

“Would you like me to wait out here for you?” Julia asked.

“No, I would like for you to come in. I need you in there. I need to tell her that I am finally finding happiness again. And that is because of you. Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” said Julia.

The two of them walked into the cemetery, Neville holding Julia’s hand in one of his and a bouquet of flowers in the other. He could walk the familiar path by memory. Some of the gravestones in the cemetery were extremely old and crumbling, and some looked brand new, with the earth in front of them only recently disturbed. There were a couple of other people in the cemetery, and Neville wondered about their story.

“It is just over here,” Neville said. He let go of Julia’s hand and walked the last few steps by himself. He had kept the gravesite well-tended, and the gravestone looked as fresh as it had when his wife had been buried.

The morning was wet, but that did not stop Neville from falling to his knees on the muddy ground. He picked up the wilted flowers from the stone vase and placed the new ones in. The rain had already filled it. He rubbed his face with one hand and looked back at the gravestone.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I did not mean for this to happen.” Neville looked behind him at his beautiful new companion. He sighed. “No, I have to stop apologizing for something that is not wrong. I know that I told you that we would spend the rest of our lives together, but I could not give you that. I tried to stay strong for you, but it is time to move on, is it not? Please tell me that I am not betraying you, my

love. I do not want any happiness if you cannot have any. I am trying; I really am. Just let me know that you are proud of me, of our daughter. Give me a sign that you are looking over us.”

Neville felt a hand on his shoulder and almost spun around, expecting his late wife to be standing there, but he realized quickly that it was Julia. A bird fluttered down and landed on the gravestone, a small robin. It pecked at something unseen before taking to the skies again. Neville smiled. His wife was never one for sending signs, and birds were not her thing. She liked them, but she would not send them as a sign.

He stood back up. Perhaps him looking for a sign was the sign that he needed. Neville placed a hand atop Julia’s, and she crouched down beside him and wrapped her other arm around his shoulders.

“She would have liked you,” said Neville. “She liked everyone, but she would have liked you especially.”

“I would have liked to have met her,” said Julia. “Although, if I did meet her, she would be....”

Neville stood up and looked at a horrified Julia for a moment before he burst out into laughter, quickly stifling it should others in the cemetery hear him. Julia only looked more shocked and embarrassed.

“I had my time with Gloria, and now I have my time with you. I know what you are saying. I always thought that I would give anything in the world to have her back, but the past is in the past, and we have to accept what comes next. I am glad that I am here with you, Julia, and I would not swap that for anything in the world.”

Neville took another look at the grave and smiled. He did not need to ask his wife for forgiveness nor anyone else. He only needed to look inside. It was too soon for him to forgive himself, but he knew that he was getting there, and all because of this fantastic woman.

Sophia should have felt free, but she did not. She and Maximilian had talked at length about how they would gently push their parents together over time, but they had hardly needed to do any work at all. Her father and Lady Julia might have thought they were being secretive with their feelings, but Sophia could see through that easily. She only hoped that her father and Lady Julia could not see through her own deception.

She did not like to call it a deception, but that is exactly how she felt about it. All the pieces of the plan had fallen into place, but she felt more constricted than ever before.

Sophia bent down to smell the chrysanthemums. The London Botanical Gardens were beautiful at this time of year, and the smells that mingled in the air were vivid and vibrant, delicate enough to warm the coldest of hearts. She walked side by side with her father, lost in deep thought.

The first part of the plan had been to have her father and Maximilian's mother admit their feelings for each other, and that had come a lot sooner than expected. Then, Maximilian had agreed to reveal all to her father. Well, not all, but enough to let their parents know that they did not have feelings for each other and that they should be allowed to marry other people.

That part had gone well, but now she was in a bind. Maximilian could come and go as he pleased, and Sophia knew that he had gone multiple times to see the opera singer in the city, even if he had not told his mother about her, but that left her without an excuse to visit

the city alone. She had tried to see Baron Vassiley again and had received correspondence from him in secret, but she had not yet been able to visit him. She was more alone when she should have been freer.

Baron Vassiley had insisted that they keep their relationship a secret for now, and she was starting to become frustrated by that. She wanted to be with him and wanted to tell her father all about him, but the Baron had to deal with some things on his end first, whatever that meant. The secret relationship was thrilling, and he was quite the catch, but what good was that if she could not be with him?

Sophia sighed and stared toward the main entrance. Maximilian was supposed to meet them here, but he had not shown up yet.

Her father glanced at her sideways as they walked, and she wanted to blurt it all out. Tell him that she was in love with a Baron and he was the most wonderful man in the world. If he just spent a little more time with him, she was sure that her father would see that. But, her father had told her that he did not know enough about the Baron., so they had to hide their relationship from him. Once her father got something in his head, he was as stubborn as a mule.

“Sophia, I have some good news,” said Neville, breaking the silence. “There is another ball next week, and now that you are deemed eligible again, you have been invited. There are going to be many eligible bachelors there, and I am sure that we are going to find a man for you that we both like.”

“That sounds wonderful, Father,” said Sophia, feigning interest. She could see that her father was trying, and he had changed from finding her a husband that he approved of to one that they both approved of, but it did not matter. She would marry the Baron when the time came, and that was that. She glanced around again, hoping to see the Baron in the gardens. They were filled with many well-dressed men and women, but the Baron was not one of them.

“I shall send a reply post-haste,” said Neville. “Everything is going to

be fine.”

Sophia wanted to scream out that everything was already fine, that she did not have to go to any balls, and that she had found someone, but she respected the Baron’s wishes. She could not start out their relationship by betraying him. Yet, she knew that there would be other balls after this one. They would come one after the other, and they would never stop until the Baron was ready to announce their relationship, and who knew when that would be. It was all so complicated.

She wanted to blurt all of that out too, but she withheld it and instead said, “Thank you, Father. I will look forward to the ball. May I ask how Lady Julia is?”

“She is fine,” said Neville with a large smile, and he glanced over at Julia, who was walking among the lavender bushes.

Sophia was happy, at least, for that. She had not seen her father this content in a long time. That was also a double-edged sword, of course. It was nice to see her father so filled with joy, but that would also mean that he would want his daughter to feel the same.

“I hope that Lady Julia is enjoying the gardens,” said Sophia.

“I am sure she is,” said Neville. “I will go and make sure.”

Sophia watched her father as he walked happily over to Julia, and she tried to formulate a plan. She could not come out and tell her father her true feelings, but perhaps she could write them down. That was always easier.

When she got home, she would find some paper and a pen. Could she just come out with it and tell him about the Baron? He would keep it a secret; she was sure of it. No matter what, she needed to find a way to not continue to attend the balls and entertain potential courtships.

“How are things with Sophia?” asked Julia. She leaned in closer to smell the lavender. “If flowers can smell as rich as their color, then the lavender bush is the prime example.”

Neville leaned in to smell it too.

Since their children had come clean about wanting the two of them to be together, they had been unable to spend very much time apart, spending the days by each other's sides and only retreating to their respective homes in the evening, though Neville would gladly have her stay.

“I believe that she is doing well. She has been invited to numerous balls now that it is known that there was never any intention of her marrying Maximilian. I had worried that she may be viewed as tainted, but I have convinced many that she was never promised to Maximilian, and they did not spend any time together. I do not wish to bend the truth, but I believe that it is the best way.”

“You are doing what is best for your daughter,” said Julia.

“How about Maximilian? Have you found out who the woman is?”

“No, he will still not tell me. Part of me fears the worst. What if she is a criminal or has a sordid past. Or what if she is not real at all, and he is only using it as an excuse because he never wants to wed. I cannot bear the thought of him being alone for the rest of his life. We both know how hard it is to be alone.”

“Yes, we do,” said Neville. He did not want to be alone any longer, not in his life nor on this day. He wanted to have Julia stay at the castle with him so that he could have his way with her, but he wanted to treat her like a lady too. They had shared their moment together in his study, and they had both enjoyed it, but he was sure that she wanted them to do things the right way this time. He would court her first before making another move like that.

Part of him wanted to know everything about her, to take his time and



savor their moments together, though another part of him, the part that knew he was not getting any younger, wanted to take her—to ravish her. Every time he looked at this woman, he felt the lust rise inside. He wanted to touch her milky-white flesh once more, run his hands over her delicate curves, and pleasure her if only to hear the moans escape her lips. Even thinking about it caused a shift in his breeches, and he had to move from his spot to hide that fact, walking towards the lilies.

“I am sure that your son will not live his life alone,” Neville added as Julia walked with him. “He is an astute young gentleman, and I do not believe that he would lie to you. I like to believe that I am a sound judge of character, and I would not worry about Maximilian.”

“Thank you, Neville. That means a lot coming from you. I believe that you are a good judge of character too. You did choose me, after all.” Julia smiled as she sipped from her tea.

“I do not think that any man could resist you,” he said. Neville turned to face Julia as they walked through the gardens, and he almost planted a kiss on her cheek, holding himself back at the last moment. He could see his daughter approaching them. She had always loved the gardens, but something else was on her mind. Neville had something else on his mind too. He wanted nothing more than to take this woman home and have her. Instead of kissing her, he gently brushed his fingers against hers.

“We should...,” Julia whispered as if she could read his mind. Her cheeks were flushed red.

“Father, may we return home?” asked Sophia when she got to them. “I have some letters to write.”

“Of course, my dear,” said Neville. “Have them ready our coach, and I will make sure that Lady Julia’s is ready.”

“Yes, Father,” said Sophia, walking off toward the entrance.

“I have already told you multiple times that I cannot resist you, and I have to have you in my bedroom right now, or I might just explode,” whispered Neville once Sophia was a sufficient distance away. “Let me pleasure you and make you feel how you should feel with a man.”

## Chapter 18

Neville took Julia by the hand and led her up the stairs. The main entranceway of the castle was crafted entirely from grey stone, but that gave it some majesty and not a dour tone. The grey was light in tone, and wooden balustrades had been added to the stone steps, a lighter pine that helped to keep the castle bright.

There were also Edinbran banners, a stag rearing up on its hind legs on a background of green. At the top of the stone steps, there was a large painting of the Cornish moors, a place where Neville had not been in a long time. There was a lot of beauty inside the castle, but the Duke paid it all no mind.

With Julia firmly gripped in his hand, there was nothing that could distract his eyes or mind. He could appreciate the beauty usually, but not when Julia was around. He pulled her behind him, and they ran up the stairs like two teenagers, both of them giggling as they ran. Julia tripped on one of the stairs and fell forward, but Neville kept his grip and held her upright.

The two of them stopped, and the near-miss had them both laughing harder, Julia light and bright, and Neville a deep, booming chuckle. He looked around quickly to see if anyone was watching them. He would not have minded if they were, but he did feel a little embarrassed to be acting like a teenager again. Embarrassed and exhilarated.

They continued on and eventually made it to Neville's room. He hesitated a moment at the door. He had not thought about it on the way up, but this was where he had spent a lot of time with his wife,

doing things that he was preparing to do with this other woman. There was a hesitation, but it was a short one before he opened the door.

The room inside was majestic, and Neville knew it. He glanced at Julia to see her taking it all in, her eyes roving from one corner to the other. Most of the furniture in the room had been picked out by his wife, but the bed was entirely his.

It was a four-poster bed, and each of the posts was carved to show a different animal. There was a lion, a stag, a raven, and a horse. Neville had spent a lot of time with the carpenter in the city to get it exactly how he wanted it. There was the finest silk from overseas hanging on each side of the luxurious bed, and the sheets were the most luxurious Egyptian cotton. It was bigger than most beds too, and it looked oversized in the room.

The art on the walls was picked out by Gloria, but Neville had approved it too. Most showed landscapes of different parts of England, all beautiful, and a few showed battle scenes of various English victories—nothing gory or gratuitous. Unlike the rest of the castle, the wooden furniture in the room was mahogany and not pine. Neville and Gloria liked the darker look, and she had always told him that they brought enough brightness to any room.

Neville knew that it was she who brought the brightness to any room—enough for the two of them. He looked quickly at Julia and knew that she had a brightness too. She was looking down at something on the floor.

“What is that?” asked Neville. He stooped down to pick it up—a letter that someone must have slipped under the door. It was obvious at first glance that Sophia had written the letter, and he immediately feared the worst.

*Father,*

*I do not know what to do anymore. I know that you only want the best for me, but I am finding each ball to be more tiresome than the last, and each suitor more boring and dull. A part of me wonders if I want to continue looking for a man.*

*Perhaps I am better suited to an academic life, and I know what you will think of that, but women can make it in an academic field if they apply themselves. I want to study father. I want to see more of the world just like Mother wanted.*

*If you force me to find a husband, I fear that I will flee from this life. I do not want to leave, Father, but a life at university seems much more exciting than endless dancing and talking with men I do not know.*

*I only want to be happy,*

*Sophia.*

Neville let the paper fall limp in his hand. He did not know how to react to what he had just read.

“What is it, Neville? Are you feeling well? You have gone pale,” said Julia.

“I do not know,” said Neville. “The letter....”

“Come, sit down for a moment,” said Julia, guiding him over toward the bed. He slumped down onto the soft mattress, Julia pushing the fabric out of the way for him. “What does the letter say?” asked Julia.

“It is from Sophia. She is threatening to run away if I send her to more balls. She wants to go to university or travel far away from me. I am losing her, Julia. I only want to make her happy, and I have pushed her away.”

“She would not do that,” said Julia. “Here, let me see that letter.” She

took the paper from a stunned Neville's hand and read it from top to bottom, Neville not saying a word. "I do not think that she is saying that," said Julia.

"She is not?" asked Neville.

"She wants to tell you how she is feeling; that much is clear," said Julia. "And that is better than anything that you could ever hope for. If she wanted to run away, she would do it. She might leave a letter saying that she had, but she would not leave a letter talking about it if she really wanted to leave."

"You really think so?" asked Neville.

"I am sure of it," she said. "But that does not mean that you should not be careful. She has told you how she feels, and you must react to that. She will not leave you, Neville, unless you force her away."

"What do I do about finding her a husband. She speaks about not wanting to find a husband, not wanting to go to any more balls. How am I supposed to do my duties as a father if I cannot find her a man who will love and cherish her."

"You are doing your duty as a father by loving and caring for her," said Julia. "She is still young, and there is a lot of time for her to find a husband. You mentioned that she has been acting differently recently. Perhaps she has found someone just like Maximilian has. Is it possible that she already has her eye on a man and has not yet told you?"

"I do not think it possible, nor do I like the idea. If she has found a man and is keeping it from me, then the man must not be of good repute, and I cannot allow her to wed such a man. I do understand what you are saying, but finding my daughter a good husband is about a lot more than just finding someone she likes. I do not want to sound arrogant, but I do know what is best for my daughter. I cannot allow her to marry just anyone."

"I know," said Julia. "I worry about the same thing for Maximilian." She slid closer to Neville on the bed and pushed her shoulder against his. He reached out and took her hand again. The thrill of passion had been quickly quenched by the letter from his daughter.

"He assures me that he is in love with a woman, and yet he does not tell me who she is," continued Julia. "What am I to make of that?"

"It does make me feel that I do not really know my daughter," said Neville.

"Can we truly know anyone?" asked Julia. "Or do we really know ourselves? I have tried to give everything to Maximilian since his father passed, tried to make his life the best that it can be. Yet, he is hiding a woman from me. What if it is not about who she is but about who I am. I want the best for Maximilian, and I have shown that in everything, including potential wives. What if he does not want to tell me who she is because he does not think that I will approve of her?"

"What if the same is true for Sophia? What if she has fallen in love with a commoner and wants to marry him?"

"What if she does?" asked Julia. Neville turned to her and studied her face. He tried to think about it, but he could not even consider the proposition. If his daughter was going to marry someone, it was going to be someone who would care for her, someone with status.

"Would you allow your son to marry a common woman?" asked Neville.

"Do you know, I believe that I would," said Julia.

Neville scoffed and held her gaze, waiting for her to smile or say that she was joking, but that did not come. Instead, she held a defiant look, and it was Neville who looked away and down at the floor.

He still could not consider it. Perhaps his daughter had found a commoner man who she loved, or maybe she was serious about

studying and not finding a man to wed. It was his duty, though; he was sure of that. She would not find happiness without the right man, at least not the kind of happiness he shared with his wife.

“What about Gloria?” asked Julia.

“What about her?” asked Neville, surprised that she had brought up his late wife.

“Was she a commoner?”

“No, she was not. My parents would not have allowed me to marry a common woman.”

“When you first saw her, you fell in love with her immediately.”

“I can still remember exactly how she looked when she entered the room,” said Neville, thinking back to one of the happiest moments in his life.

“And when you first saw her, you knew her family; you knew exactly who she was and her background?”

“It was the first time I had seen her in my life,” he said. “I fell in love with her without knowing anything more about her.”

“And if she were a commoner, you would have immediately fallen out of love with her when you found out, right? You would have left her behind and found someone who was more suited to you, more suited to your parents?”

Neville tried not to smile. She had backed him into a corner exquisitely, and there was no escape from her grasp. She had him entranced with her beauty, but he had failed to see just how keen an intellect she had. The smile widened more. “It is not fair to dazzle me with your beauty so you can convince me with your facts.”

“I believe that you backed yourself into a corner, and I only reminded



you of what you already knew.” Julia placed her head on Neville’s shoulder and sighed. “I hope that Maximilian knows that I will accept any woman for him—he does not need to hide it from me.”

“I know that you are right about this,” said Neville. “I still believe that I know best for my daughter, but I will concede that I would not be able to stand in the way of a love like the one Gloria and I shared. If Sophia was to find that, I do not believe that there would be anything that I could do to stop it anyway.”

“So, we are in agreement then?” asked Julia.

“About what?” asked Neville.

“About allowing our children to choose the partners that they like best. About allowing them to marry whoever they want without our interference.”

“I agree in part,” said Neville. “I will try my very best not to interfere with my daughter’s feelings, and I will try to accept whoever she may choose, but a little guidance from a parent is never a bad thing.”

“I think our children will be able to live with that,” said Julia, kissing Neville’s cheek.

“If it were not for you, Julia, I might think that I had a full-scale rebellion on my hands. My daughter has the tendency to be as stubborn as I do. Perhaps she has not met anyone yet, and everything will be fine, but I will keep an open mind.”

“With that problem dealt with, perhaps we can do exactly what we came up here to do,” whispered Julia.

“Your shoulders are very tense,” said Julia. She shifted her head from Neville’s shoulder and unwrapped her arm from around him. The bed was soft under her rear, and she did not think that she had ever been in a more luxurious and comfortable mattress, and definitely not one as big. She wanted to stretch out on it and just lay in the enormous sheets.

“You have been holding in a lot for a long time, and I am sure that this letter does not help, but you do not need to worry about it.” Julia shifted onto her knees on the bed and moved across behind Neville. She placed a hand on each shoulder and began to massage him. “Your daughter is trying to talk to you. You should be proud of the way that you have raised her.”

“That feels good,” said Neville. “Both your touch and your words.”

Julia could feel the tightness under his shirt, and she worked her fingers into his muscles, working her hands over his shoulders, upper arms, and neck. A moan came from Neville as she moved her hands over his neck, working gently to release the tension.

She was being honest when she said that she would be fine with her son marrying a commoner. She would not mind who he was with, as long as he was happy. Julia hoped that Neville could do the same for Sophia, but she acknowledged that he was at least trying.

Neville stretched his shoulders, moving them in circles as Julia continued to massage them. She slid her hands down from his shoulders and onto his chest, leaning forward so that she could bury

her head in his neck.

His chest was muscular and powerful, and she moved her hands over the tight chest muscles, massaging them too. She could feel that he kept himself in good shape, and she worried a little that he would be put off by her body, though the way that he had touched her previously suggested that he liked how she looked.

There was a new smell on the Duke, and it must have been a new cologne put on especially for her. His regular sandalwood musk had been replaced with a more delicate aroma that reminded her of rose water or rose hips, but not quite the same. He had smelled exquisite before, and he did again now.

With her fingers, she searched out for the buttons on the front of his shirt and unbuttoned them one by one. When the first few were undone, she reached inside the shirt and pushed her fingers through his thick hair. Neville responded by letting his head fall back onto Julia's shoulder, and she turned her head to kiss his neck tenderly.

Another rub of the muscular chest, and Julia went back to removing the shirt. The buttons slid out of the loops easily, practically begging her to remove the shirt. She had seen the Duke with his shirt off not long ago, and she had been waiting since then to see him shirtless again. He looked like a man half his age, and she had been fighting the urge to touch his muscles when they had been together. She would not need to fight it now—she had him all to herself.

The Duke raised up his arms as Julia pulled on the bottom of the shirt, untucking it from his trousers and removing his arms from the sleeves. She tossed the shirt to the side as it landed on the wooden floor. She wrapped both hands around Neville, gently caressing his chest and stomach. She continued to kiss his neck as his back arched.

Julia leaned in even more, feeling the warmth come from Neville. The last time she had been with the Duke in his study, there had been an owl hooting outside. Now, there was a bird outside his bedroom, perhaps a sparrow, chirping out its afternoon song. Pushed against

him, and with her hands on the Duke's chest, Julia could feel the storm brewing inside of her.

It was like the night that had brought them together. The passion inside of her struck like lightning, pulses lighting up her insides, and the thumping of her heartbeat was as loud as thunder in her ears. She could feel a pouring from her stomach to between her legs, begging to be released. She had suffered from not believing that she was an attractive woman since her husband had passed, but she was starting to feel beautiful again—the Duke was responsible for it all.

She could not stop herself any longer, and she reached down with her hands to his trousers, unbuckling the belt that was there. Neville reached around behind him with his hands, touching Julia's body for the first time that afternoon. She writhed with pleasure at his touch and thought that she was about to explode again, but she managed to contain herself.

Her hand entered his breeches, and she took him, moving her hand gently and enjoying the feel of his body vibrating against her. His hands moved up and down her sides, grabbing onto whatever he could reach, and she teased him slowly, kissing his neck still as she moved her hand.

"I do not think it fair that you get all the pleasure," said Neville. He stood up from her grip and turned to face her, removing his breeches and underwear. He stood in front of her for a moment, and she admired the view. The last man she had seen naked was her husband, and that had been quite a few years ago.

The Duke was muscular in his legs too, and she wanted to sit there and look at his body all day. His hair was greying on his head and over his body, and that only served to make him look more distinguished and mature. She eyed his chest, a delight to touch, and she glanced at his muscular thighs, thick and sturdy. Then there was what was between his legs, and she wanted to reach out and touch him, but she held back.

“I find myself naked here in front of you, and I do believe that it is your time to undress,” said Neville.

Julia felt some nervousness again, but she stood up from the bed and turned around so that the Duke could unlatch the ties on the back of her dress. He took a turn kissing her neck this time as he unhooked her. The dress slipped off to the floor, leaving her in her corset. Neville wasted no time in untying that too. Julia felt herself being released from the clothing, and when the corset fell to the floor, she was naked too.

“That is better,” said Neville, wrapping his arms around her from behind, cupping her breasts and squeezing them. Julia brought her hands up and covered his, holding his hands on her body.

“Tell me again that I am beautiful,” she said. She did not want to sound needy, but she enjoyed it when he complimented her, and it filled her with confidence.

“You are a work of art,” said Neville. “You are like the goddesses that are painted by the old artists. I want to touch you all over, and it makes me revel in pleasure that I am able to. You are the fruit that I have been waiting to pluck from this world, a fine wine that has matured over the years and I am now about to drink. Let my touch be proof of how beautiful your body is, Julia.”

Neville moved his hands out from under hers and ran them over her body, moving them up to her neck and then down to her abdomen, and briefly touching between her legs, sending a shiver of pleasure running through her. Julia reached behind and took Neville in her hand again, matching the speed at which he touched her.

Julia did feel like a goddess. She was in a castle being caressed by a handsome man, aroused by his strength and touch. She had not dreamed that she would feel this way again. Neville spun her around, and she was only able to gaze into his dark eyes for a moment before he kissed her, and she closed her eyes.

She swam as if she had been dropped into the middle of the ocean, but it was not cold. His arms crept around her, and she could not move her body, only her lips as they moved with the Duke's, the pleasure too much for her to be able to think. She was aware of being picked up, her lips still locked with Neville's, her lips moving and her tongue dancing, and she was moved to the bed. She knew only by the softness beneath her.

Neville pushed her arms up behind her, and she let herself be directed. When his lips left hers, she wanted to call out for him to return, but she forgot all about that when his lips touched her neck. She pulsed with pleasure as he kissed her over and over. He worked his way down her body, stopping on her chest, her collarbone, and paying attention to her breasts, kissing around the nipples first before pleasuring those areas too. She shivered in satisfaction as he licked at her, caressing her body with his tongue.

Her stomach was next, and he kissed tenderly, fondling her breasts with his hands. He brought a hand up to her mouth, and she kissed his finger before nibbling on it tenderly. Her thighs were next to be kissed, and he moved around her, teasing her until she could take it no longer.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, yes, yes."

His hands moved over her body, from her neck to her thighs, and he continued to kiss and lick, not venturing to her garden just yet, but she knew that it was coming. Julia reached her hands back farther and grabbed a pillow. She brought it over her head with one hand to subdue the moans and grabbed onto the wooden headboard with the other to steady herself. She spread her legs wide, inviting him in.

Neville did not need any further invitation, and she felt his touch first and then his tongue. He moved deftly, tasting her and kissing her. He was slow and gentle, and Julia was sure that she was going to explode quickly just like last time, but she managed to control it this time, and he took it slow to draw it out, the pleasure only intensifying with each touch of his lips or tongue.

She let go of the headboard and moved her hand down to the back of his head, into his thick hair. “Mmm,” she moaned, drawing out the sound as long as she could. She held his head there, and he started to work his tongue quicker, pleasuring her as she had never been pleased before. There was a sudden flick of his tongue, and it felt like a waterfall of warm water cascading over her.

Julia arched her back and let out a low, loud moan. She pushed the soft pillow into her face to try and quiet herself, but the moan escaped anyway. Another flick of his tongue, and she was filled with a warmth. Her body became uncontrollable, and she could not stop it from jerking up and down, her back arching until she thought that she was going to snap in two.

Neville moved on top of her, his arms wrapped around her body. He lay his head on her chest, his ear to her skin. Julia panted heavily, trying to catch her breath and her sanity. She placed her hands on Neville’s back and took a deep breath, her head falling to the side.

“I do not know how you do that to me, Neville. I do not think that I have ever felt this way before. I am positive that I am never going to be able to be away from you ever again.” Julia could feel it. She was starting to fall in love with the Duke.

Sophia sat in her bedroom and looked over the letters that the Baron had sent her. Each one was eloquent and loving. He had all but confessed his love for her, and that was after them only being together two times. She had written him back often, sneaking the letters past her father, and he had complimented her several times on her handwriting.

It had been hard to wait. Everyone around her was so happy. She could not ever remember her father being as joyful as he was now. She knew that he was extremely happy when he was with her mother, but she had passed giving birth to her, so she had not ever been able to meet her nor see the man her father used to be.

Their relationship gave her confidence and courage. She had heard many times from her father about how love at first sight had made everything easy. It was not love at first sight with the Baron, but she was sure that it was love at second sight.

She had seen Maximilian a few times over the past week, too, when Julia had visited the castle, and it was fun to catch up with him. He was deeply in love with the opera singer, and had vowed to tell his mother soon, though Sophia had laughed long and hard when he had told her that he had not yet told the opera singer about it either. He had been going to see her for weeks now and had not talked to her yet. Maximilian also laughed when she did, and they had both been unable to stop for a long time.

Her father, Lady Julia, and Maximilian—they were all reasons for her to do what she was about to do. Them, and the most recent letter that



she had received from the Baron. It had come after she had penned the one to her father, but that would help to soften the blow. She had never really thought about leaving and only wanted to tell her father how she felt while trying to put a halt to all of the balls and courtships.

Finally, it was all coming together.

She unfolded the letter and read it one more time.

*Dearest Sophia,*

*You have suffered for far too long, and it warms my heart that you have respected my wishes and kept us a secret. I ask only that you keep our secret for a little longer.*

*But I find myself thinking about you, fantasizing about our future together, wanting to be with you every minute of every day. I want to kiss you, touch you, and do much more wicked things. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever met.*

*That is why I must invite you to London for a clandestine meeting. One more secret before I reveal our glorious relationship to the world. Do you remember where we met in the city? Meet me there tonight if you can. I will be waiting with my arms open and my eyes watching.*

*Your secret admirer.*

Julia's heart fluttered again. When the letter had first come, she had barely been able to contain her excitement, and she wanted to tell her father all about the Baron. Now, she would get to tell him everything after only a little more waiting. As she sat on her bed with her bag patiently waiting, she knew that she was doing the right thing.

Her father had left not long ago for an engagement with Lady Julia, and Maximilian had arrived soon after. She could not risk taking one of her own coaches for her father would surely find out where she had gone, and she did not want that just yet. It would only be a day or two until she would be able to send him correspondence, and she hated to think about worrying him for that long, but it would all work out in the end.

She would be married, and her father would be happy. That is what they both dreamed of.

When she saw Maximilian's coach approaching the estate, she ran downstairs to meet him. The fewer people who saw her leave, the better. It was only moments later that she was safely in the carriage and on her way to London and her new life.

"Thank you again, Maximilian. You have been like a brother to me, and I suppose that you may be soon if my father and your mother carry on as they are."

"What a thought," he replied. "It would be nice to have a sister by marriage. Are you sure that you do not need a carriage back home when you have met with the Baron?"

"No need," she said, not happy about lying to Maximilian either. "I have another friend who will be waiting to give me a ride home."

"You have other friends?" asked Maximilian sarcastically.

Sophia reached over and slapped his arm. "Please do not tease me," she said. A smile crept to her lips. "Why were you so easily convinced to escort me to London? Perhaps there is a songbird singing tonight?"

"And now you tease me," he said with a smile. "I believe that I am working up the courage to speak to her tonight. But what if she laughs at me."

"I am sure that she has seen you admiring her from afar, Maximilian.

How many times have you seen her sing? Nine, ten, a million? If she were worried about you, someone would have said. I believe that you are going to do just fine.”

“This could be the beginning of new lives for the both of us,” he said.

“I think you are right.” Sophia stared at the bag that she had packed.

When the coach stopped in the heart of London, Sophia’s excitement level went upon another notch.

“Is he here?” asked Maximilian.

“Yes, I see him,” said Sophia. She kept an eye on the Baron as she grabbed her bag and opened the door. She stepped down from the coach. “Good luck,” she said to Maximilian.

“Thank you, you too,” he said.

The door was closed, and the coach left, venturing farther into London. Sophia walked quickly through the park where they had first met alone and into the open arms of Baron Vassiley, who was waiting for her.

“Can it be true?” asked Sophia. “Can we really be together finally?”

“We can,” said the Baron. “I have one more thing to take care of, and then you and I will be married.”

“Really?” asked Sophia, tears coming to her eyes. “I am so glad to hear you say that. I could not wait for you, and I know that we are only supposed to meet for the evening, but I had to do it.”

“What did you do?” asked Baron Vassiley.

“I packed my bag,” said Sophia. “I hope that is fine with you. You said that we could be together, but I could not wait for more than a minute. Do not worry; no one knows that I am doing this. I left in

secrecy, and Maximilian thinks I am returning home later tonight. My father will be angry, but it is for the greater good. Please say that I can stay with you. Please, please!”

“How can I deny such a cute request?” said the Baron. “Or such beauty. I do believe that we will talk your father around when the time comes. Yes, you can stay with me, and I promise that I will not try to take advantage of you, as hard as that will be for me.”

“Pity,” said Sophia with a smile.

“You make it very hard for me to act appropriately, Sophia, but I want to do this right, both for you and your father. Come on, let us walk while the day is still warm. I have to pick up a package a few streets from here, but I am all yours after that.”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Sophia. The Baron held out his arm, and she eagerly took it, feeling the muscles again beneath his shirt. He had dressed impeccably once more, this time in a different outfit. But the outfit did not matter—she was more interested in what was underneath. It was a pity that the Baron would not do anything with her, but she only loved him more for that. He was a gentleman. A roguishly handsome gentleman who she could not stay away from.

“Are you sure you do not mind that I packed a bag? It felt a very impulsive thing to do, and I do not want to seem needy,” said Sophia. “My goodness, even saying that out loud makes me seem needy for validation.”

Baron Vassiley stopped walking and chuckled. He faced Sophia. “I do not mind at all. Truth be told, I have wanted to spend more time with you, but I did not want to put you off by being too forward.”

“What a tale we will have to tell our grandchildren,” said Sophia. “So much secrecy at the start of our relationship. I have to admit that it is very exciting.”

“And we will have many grandchildren,” he said. “I want to have a

large family with you.”

“Oh, my father will enjoy that very much. Everything is coming together so well. We are all going to be one big happy family.” Sophia was thinking about herself, Maximilian, Lady Julia, and her father. They had all come together at the perfect moment.

Baron Vassiley had not started walking again, and he continued to look at Sophia. His face took on a more serious tone, and Sophia felt her heart skip a beat.

“I have to tell you something,” said the Baron. “Something from my past, but it needs to come out so that there are no secrets, at least not from each other.”

“You can tell me anything,” said Sophia, but she was suddenly worried that this was going to ruin everything.

“I was married previously,” he said.

“Oh,” replied Sophia. “I mean, that is not too bad, is it? What happened to your wife.”

“I was young and stupid. I used to drink a lot, and I liked women too much. I am not proud to say it, but I cheated on her. I cheated on her a lot. She found out, and she went crazy. That is not said as an expression. She is locked up in the psych ward. That was a low point in my life, and I hit rock bottom. That was the man I was, but it is not the man I am anymore, I promise you that. After everything came out, I decided not to let anyone down ever again. I want to be truthful with you, Sophia, and you deserve to know my past. But, I promise you that I am not that man anymore, and I will spend my life proving it to you.”

“Oh,” was all that Sophia could say again. She was processing it. Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew that she would be able to get past this, but she needed some time.

“Let us continue on,” the Baron said. “I know from your face that this is a lot to take in. I do not expect you to accept it immediately, but I did not want to start our life together with any secrets.”

Sophia could only nod and walk with the Baron. She was glad that she knew now and not later. The Baron had been nothing but a gentleman with her, but the past was shocking, and what worried her the most was what her father would say about it all. She wished that she had been told all of this before she came, but it was not something to be said in a letter.

“I have to go inside,” said the Baron when they arrived in front of a green door. “There is a gambling establishment inside, so I beg you to wait out here for me. I know this street, and you will be safe. I will only be a moment.”

Sophia nodded her head again, still in a daze. She watched him go through the door and did not know if she knew him as well as she thought she did. Her heart raced, and she took a deep breath. Sophia looked up and down the quiet street and suddenly felt very alone.

A shadow moved, and a hand was around her mouth, another around her neck. She tried to scream out, and a piece of cloth was rammed into her mouth, some fabric tied to keep it in. A hood obscured her vision, ropes bound her, and she was dragged off, unable to call out for the Baron.

Sophia prayed for a quick death.

Neville was in turmoil. Everything had been going so well, and now that had all been taken away from him. Sophia had been missing for an entire day, and no one knew where she was. The Duke had sent a messenger to Julia's house after one of the help had seen Sophia leave in one of her carriages. It was presumed that she had gone out with Maximilian, but the reply came back that Maximilian had returned home and had not seen Sophia.

She had never been out overnight before, and Neville was starting to fear the worst. He would not be able to forgive himself for not tending to her needs. He could see it all clearly now. He had been the stubborn one who had not listened to his own daughter, and now she had run off. She would be alone in the world without him to take care of her, and there was no telling what would happen to her.

Neville had alerted the constabulary, and they were on the case, but as much as he tried, only grim outcomes pervaded his thoughts. He could not sit at home any longer by himself and did the only thing that he could think of doing, and that was going to Julia. He could not be alone at a moment like this, even though Sophia would be.

The carriage ride over to her house was agonizing. He could not sit still the entire ride, and he constantly worried that Sophia would return home to find him gone. Three times, he almost ordered the driver to turn the coach around.

When he got there, Julia came running out to greet him. He ran into her arms and held her tightly. This woman was becoming special to him, but he could not think about that right now with Sophia lost.

“Have they found her?” asked Julia.

“No,” said Neville. He wanted to follow that up, but there was nothing else to say. He held her tight again, not wanting to be alone. “I think that she has gone to London. The letter.”

“She would not have left without telling you first, I am sure of it,” said Julia. “It just does not make any sense.”

“What does not make sense about it?” asked Neville. He could feel the anger bubbling inside. “She wrote in her letter that she was going to run off to London, and she is not here anymore. What is there not to understand, Julia!”

“Please do not talk to me like that,” she said. “I know that you are angry, but do not take it out on me.”

“I am sorry,” said Neville immediately, realizing that he was going to drive this woman away too. “I am angry. I must leave for London. The constables have not found her. I have to go and look for my daughter.”

“I will come with you, of course,” said Julia.

“No, you do not need—”

“Nonsense. You have lost your daughter, and she must be found. I cannot sit at home while you are in turmoil.”

“I am sorry for lashing out,” said Neville. “I would enjoy the company.”

“Let me tell Maximilian where I am going, and we can leave together.”

“Thank you,” said Neville. He turned as she left and looked out into the woodlands. Perhaps Sophia was not in the city at all and had gotten lost in the forest or the moors. Maybe he would never find her.



Neville looked up to the heavens above and quietly whispered a prayer. The sky was grey and somber, the sun unable to break through the thick clouds.

Julia was not gone a minute when she came running out of the manor with Maximilian.

“Tell the Duke what you told me,” she said, slightly out of breath.

“I did not know,” said Maximilian. He looked down at the ground, ashamed of something that he had done. “When Mother asked me, I did not know that Sophia was missing. I should have told you, Your Grace, but I was the one who traveled with Sophia to London yesterday, and now Mother tells me that she has not returned.”

“So, you know where she is?” asked Neville.

“I believe that I do,” said Maximilian. “She asked me to keep it a secret, but I do not believe that it is right in these circumstances. She assured me that she was returning yesterday evening.”

“Who is she with?” asked Neville, keeping his voice calm even though his face was red.

“She has fallen in love with a Baron, Your Grace. I believe that she met him at a ball recently. She must be with him. Again, Your Grace, I would never have engaged in this plan if I knew it would end like this.”

“What is the Baron’s name?” asked Neville.

“Lord Vassiley, Your Grace.”

“Yes, I believe I have met him previously. I do not think Sophia was pleased when I informed her that he was not a good match. Not much is known about the man.”

“This is my fault, Your Grace,” said Maximilian. “I must accompany

you to London and help to find your daughter.”

“I will allow it,” said Neville, only blaming himself.

“Let us all go together,” said Julia, walking purposefully toward the coach. Neville quickly followed, with a forlorn Maximilian close behind. The Duke did not have any energy to be angry at the young man. All he wanted was his daughter back, and he was prepared to accept any help he could get.

The ride was completed in silence. Maximilian opened his mouth a couple of times to say something before thinking better of it. Julia sat beside Neville with her hand on his while he stared out of the window. The anger was building again—not towards Maximilian but toward this Baron. How dare he take his daughter without so much as a word. If he was not a fit suitor before, he had just ruined any chance he had.

When they pulled up at the Baron’s London residence, the sky had darkened, and there was a light spattering of rain. Neville was impressed by the Baron’s abode even if he did not like the man himself. The home was impressive indeed for one so central in London, especially in one of the nicer districts. The brickwork was embellished with carvings, statues adorning the front gardens. It stood out from all the other stately homes around it.

When he got to the door, he banged on it with his fist a dozen times before it was swung open by a shocked-looking butler.

“Where is she?” Neville demanded.

“Sir, I—”

“Sophia!” Neville called out, looking beyond the butler. “Sophia!”

“What is the meaning—” Baron Vassiley appeared on the marble staircase beyond the shocked butler. “Lord Neville, is that you? Your Grace, what has happened?”

“Where is she, Vassiley? What have you done with my daughter?”

“Your daughter?” asked the Baron, his eyes widening. “Has something happened to her?” He almost ran down the stairs to get to the front door.

“You know very well that something has happened to her,” said Neville. “She came to London to meet with you yesterday, and now she has not returned home.”

Baron Vassiley looked beyond the Duke to Maximilian before focussing on the Duke again. “I did meet with her,” he said, still in shock. “She has not returned home? Then where has she gone.”

“She is with you,” said Neville, his voice starting to break.

“I left her in your care,” said Maximilian, climbing the steps to stand beside Neville. The confused butler stood in the entranceway, unsure of what to do.

“You did, but she left shortly after,” said the Baron.

“Sophia!” shouted Neville again.

“Your Grace, you are most welcome to come inside, but your daughter is not here. No, you must come in anyway. You have traveled from your residence, have you not? Please, come sit down inside, and I shall offer any help that I can. I know the city and some of the people in it. If she is still in London, I can help you find her. Larsson, will you instruct the housekeeper to have brandy brought for the men and some tea for the lady. Follow me, Your Grace.”

Neville wanted to scream out again, but he knew that Sophia was not there. His hopes had risen along with his anger when Maximilian had told him about Baron Vassiley, but the hope had slipped away, leaving only rage.

“I do not know what to tell you, Your Grace,” said the Baron, inviting

them into the sitting room. "I did meet with Sophia yesterday, and we were secretly in contact with each other. She spoke about marriage, and I wanted nothing more. We only hid this from you because she was at one point promised to another. She was to wed Maximilian, was she not?"

Maximilian nodded his head.

"She wanted for you to find love first, and I believe that you have," continued the Baron, gesturing toward Julia. "After that, she wanted your blessing. I only wanted to do this right, and I wanted to prove myself to you, Your Grace. How long has she been missing?"

"For a day," said the Duke.

"Then she may still return," said Baron Vassiley, sipping on his brandy. Neville had not touched his. "I will not let her be lost. You have my word that I will search for her until my dying days."

"I do not understand," said Neville. "You do not show the concern of one who is in love, and how did she leave yesterday? If the two of you were together, did she not say goodbye? You must have some notion of where she went and with whom."

"To tell you the truth, Your Grace, I have been in turmoil since I last saw her. I am in love with your daughter, and I want to marry her, but I thought that she wanted nothing more to do with me, and I have been preparing myself for never seeing her again. Now, you place this news upon me. I do not know how I am supposed to react."

"What happened yesterday?" asked Neville, his rage only increasing with this man.

"I believed that I had ruined our relationship for good. I had to pick up a package in the city, and I regaled her with my past. I am a changed man now, but I have done some things in the past that I am not proud of, and I told her all. I also informed her that I had been married previously and that my former wife is now in a psychiatric

ward. I wanted to be honest with your daughter, and I want to be honest with you too, Your Grace. You have my word that I will not rest until I find her, and once I do, I will do all that I can to convince you that I am worthy of Sophia.”

“Maximilian will stay with you,” said Neville. “He has a debt to pay, and you do too. Maximilian brought her to London, and you lost her, Baron Vassiley. I expect the two of you to do all that you can to find my daughter. The constables are looking for her, and I am too. That is all that I have to say on the matter.”

“Of course,” said Baron Vassiley. Maximilian only looked over at the Duke and bowed his head slightly. He could not hide his look of shame.

“I shall take my leave,” said Neville, rising. Julia rose too, while Maximilian remained in his chair, a lost look on his face.

“If you find her, you are to contact me immediately,” said Neville.

“I will,” said the Baron. “I am sure that she is safe, Your Grace. We will find her, and this will all turn out to be a big misunderstanding.”

“I hope so, for your sake, Baron Vassiley.”

For a moment, the Baron looked as if he was about to lash out, but, instead, he nodded. Neville turned and left, Julia soon following him.

“I am sorry to leave your son there,” said Neville when they were outside. “He does have a debt to repay, but I left him there to watch the Baron. I still do not trust that man.”

“*I* have a residence in London,” said Neville. “If you will accompany me there, I will have the coach return you home soon after.”

“Home?” asked Julia. “I am not returning home. Your daughter is missing, and I will not rest either until she is found.”

“She is my daughter,” said Neville, a little too loudly. “I am the one responsible for her.” He stormed off toward the coach, but Julia quickly followed. Her husband had been just as stubborn at times.

“You cannot do everything alone, Neville,” she said, catching his arm. He turned around to face her, and she did not recognize him for a second. “You need to ask for help sometimes. I’m here to help you, and I am not leaving until we figure this out.”

Neville stood there, staring intently at her like a wild animal. She held his gaze and waited until she saw a flicker in his deep brown eyes, the color of oak when it had been freshly polished. The Duke softened before her.

“Fine,” he said resignedly. “I am sorry again, Julia. I know that you are trying to help me, and I am treating you poorly. I do not think that I will be the same man until I have Sophia back. Please forgive me until then.”

“I do not need to forgive you, Neville. Please, hold me. I feel the turmoil too. She is your daughter, but she feels like family to me. I cannot imagine what it would be like to lose Maximilian. We will find

her, Neville; I know that we will.”

“But, what if we—”

“Do not even think that. You must continue to think positively. Sophia is an amazing, strong woman. She is out there somewhere, and she will be surviving wherever she is. Just try to talk to her when you find her, Neville. I am sure that she has a good reason for running off.”

Neville stepped forward, and Julia held onto him, wrapping her arms around his strong body and feeling his embrace close in around her. She was safe here in his arms. This was exactly where she was meant to be, and once they overcame this last hurdle, they could be together forever. She and Neville had not spoken about it, but she knew that he felt the same way.

She lay her head on Neville’s shoulder, taking in his familiar scent. There was a chill in the air, and he warmed her—in more ways than one. “We will find her,” she whispered. “We will find her together.”

Julia had not expected to find love ever again in her life, especially at her age, but love had found her, and her feelings for the Duke were real. She wanted to call out that she loved the Duke but was worried that she would ruin everything. He had treated her well, except for his initial hesitation toward their relationship, but she was not sure if the Duke had as strong feelings as she did.

She remained quiet as they embraced. This was not the time for feelings like that. Besides, he was a Duke, and she was only an old widow. She prepared herself for the fact that she would not be enough for him.

Neville pulled apart. There was a look of stoic determination on his face. He took one last look back at the stone house, and Julia did too. Her son was in there, and who knew how that would work out. The door to the carriage was opened, and Neville gestured for Julia to enter first.

“Johnson,” Neville said to one of the two footmen, “I want you to find a horse and return to the castle. A skeleton staff is to be brought to my London residence, and the remainder, along with any able-bodied men, is to be sent to commence a search for my daughter. I want every part of the city searched, and if we do not find her, we will search the surrounding areas and then the country itself.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The footman ran off hastily.

Neville watched him for a second before getting into the carriage and sitting beside Julia. He did not take her hand, and she decided not to take his. The man needed his space. Julia could feel every bump of the coach as they traveled through London. Everything was accentuated. The birds were louder outside the carriage as they passed by quickly, the smells were fleeting and intense, the images of houses and other buildings a blur.

If Sophia was not found, Neville would not recover. Julia did not want to think the worst, but her mind went there. They were going to find Sophia, she was sure of that, but what if they did not? It would be the end of everything.

The Duke’s London residence was grand but not as grand as Baron Vassiley’s. Julia knew men and could sense the Duke’s jealousy of the Baron. Her husband had often been jealous of other men, though on a much smaller scale.

Neville walked straight up the steps and unlocked the door with a large key. Julia followed him into the large house and followed as he paced the large rooms. She eventually went to the kitchen to make some tea, hoping that it would calm Neville enough until help arrived

\* \* \*

The castle staff arrived soon after, and Julia got out of their way. The tea had not helped to calm Neville, but the arrival of more people lifted the mood. All of the employees of Edinbran Castle had answered the call, and there was a search going out all over London.



It was admirable the way that Neville had burst into action when everyone had arrived. Groups of men and women had been sent out, Neville directing them to different parts of the city and checking it off on the map that he had procured. Julia let him be and watched him from afar. Not long after the people had come, the entire city was being searched.

Julia busied herself with helping to ready the home for a long stay. She hoped that would not be the case, and there were plenty of maids to take care of the work, but she could not sit still—just like Neville. The entire time, she kept an eye on him, ready to go to him should he need her. He had almost left without her noticing, but she had been walking through the main foyer when he had come to put on his jacket before going out.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I cannot sit here while she is out there,” Neville said.

“There are hundreds of people looking for her now,” said Julia. “You need to rest, Neville. Someone needs to stay here and organize everything.”

“I cannot just sit here,” he said.

“Then I am coming with you,” she said.

“It is getting dark, and the streets of London at night are no place for a lady.”

“I will be with you, and you will protect me, will you not?” Julia folded her hands across her chest.

“I do not believe that this is a fight that I can win,” said the Duke. He walked out of the house, and Julia grabbed her shawl quickly to follow him. Neville walked alone, and Julia was sure that he was out in the night to find some peace, more than being a part of the search effort. He was weary and tired. Julia caught up to him and linked her

arm through his. The Duke was becoming a shell of the man he used to be.

“I do feel safe when I am with you,” said Julia. She pulled her shawl tighter around her body, a chill in the night air. The clouds from earlier had given way, and the black sky was dotted with stars, the moon nowhere to be seen. The occasional person passed them, and the farther they ventured away from the residence and into the streets of London, the more worried Julia became.

They were both well-dressed, and a thief would look at them as an easy target. She had heard stories from friends but never thought that she would be put in a position where it may actually happen to her. As they walked, she gripped tighter and tighter to the Duke’s arm. As long as she was with him, she was not as afraid.

The wandering was aimless. Julia had no idea where they were going or how far they were from home, but she followed Neville’s lead. They had not passed anyone for a while, and she was unsure how long they had been wandering, but her feet were beginning to get painful. Neville displayed a slight limp, favoring his left leg over his right—perhaps an old war wound.

Julia stopped walking and held tight onto Neville’s arm, stopping him too. All of the streets were starting to look the same. “We cannot keep going, Neville. I fear that you are going to drop from exhaustion, and that is not good for anyone. Let us go home and rest. We will continue the search the first light in the morning.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose that you are right,” said Neville, his tone weary and absent. In the pale glow of the streetlights, his face looked ghostly. He looked around, frowning as he did, and then directed them back down the street they had just come. They walked for what seemed like hours before the house came back into view.

They were greeted at the door by the butler and informed that there was no news yet. Neville was led up the stairs, and he sat down on his bed in the bedroom. It was more modest than the one back at the

castle, but some of the same touches were apparent. It was tasteful but muted, with similar artworks on the wall and darker furniture than the rest of the house.

“I can go,” said Julia, hesitantly. They had not spoken about sleeping arrangements, but she was sure that there would be many guest rooms to choose from.

“No, please stay,” he said. Neville stood up and started to unbutton his shirt, but his fingers fumbled on the buttons. “Blast it!” he shouted, ripping at the shirt.

“Let me,” said Julia. “You are much too tired.

Neville’s shoulders slumped, and his head drooped forward. Julia took her time to unbutton the buttons on the front of the shirt, opening the front to reveal his glorious chest. She helped him remove the shirt, and he groaned as he did.

“You are working yourself too much,” she said. “Lie down on the bed.” Julia guided the Duke and laid him facedown on the large bed. She worked her way up so that she was sitting astride his rear. “You feel tight,” she said as she rubbed her hands over his back muscles. Neville only groaned in response.

Julia leaned down and kissed his back. She moved her hands gently over his body, pressing down tenderly on the muscles that had tightened with stress. She worked her fingers into them, helping to relieve the tension and working out her own stress by being able to help this man that she was falling for.

She leaned forward and pushed against his back, the moans coming from him reaching her ears. Her hands switched from working his muscles to tenderly caressing him. She kissed his back again, hoping that she was helping this man, tracing his outline with her fingers. When she had massaged him for a while, she slowly lowered herself onto him, wrapping her arms underneath his body.

“She is gone,” said Neville, dreamlike in the way he spoke.

“She is not gone, Neville, do not talk like that.”

“It is my fault. It is all my fault,” whispered Neville.

“She is going to come back, we are going to find her. Sophia is out there somewhere. We are going to be a family,” she said, nerves rising inside.

“Even if she returns, she is gone,” continued Neville as if he had not heard what Julia had just said. “I have driven her away, and she is lost forever.”

Julia held him tighter, snores coming from the Duke.

Maximilian sat in his chair as the Baron walked out of the room. There was not a word exchanged between them once his mother and the Duke had left. The Baron was certainly a handsome and well-dressed man, and one who was very affluent, but he was not personable. He must have been with Sophia, but he seemed annoyed to have this stranger in his house.

A butler stood in the corner watching Maximilian's every move, ready to pounce into action should he need anything. Maximilian had no idea what to do now. He wanted to help find Sophia, but the Baron had no intention of including him. He rose up quickly from his chair, the butler standing straighter, ready to help, but Maximilian strode past him, off in search of the Baron.

The house was much larger than he thought, and Maximilian spent a few minutes wandering from room to room until he finally found the Baron sitting at a desk in his study. He was composing a letter and quickly pushed it to the side when Maximilian entered the room.

"Yes," said the Baron after the silence lingered in the air for a few seconds.

"My Lord," said Maximilian with a slight bow of his head. "What do we do next? I am at your service."

"We?" asked Baron Vassiley. "There is no we. I know all about you, Maximilian. You had your chance with Sophia, and she rejected you. How am I to trust a man who was rejected by the one I love. And she tells me that you have fallen in love with a common singer. There is

no we when I am in the presence of a man who makes such decisions.”

“It was not like that,” said Maximilian. “We were not in love, and she had found you, and I—”

“Are you arguing with me in my own home?” asked the Baron. “It is obvious that the Duke of Edinbran does not want you around after what you did to his daughter, and he has left you here for me to look after.”

“I only want to help,” said Maximilian, starting to wonder if he really had offended the Duke or his daughter. “Let me do something. You have people out there looking for her, right? Let me join the search. Let me redeem myself.”

“The best thing that you can do,” said Baron Vassiley, “is to stay out of my way. I will be the one to find her and I was composing this letter when you so rudely interrupted me. Now, I am behind on where I was. So, you have done nothing but delay her being found. Is there anything else you want?”

“I....”

“And still, you stand here talking with me when my betrothed is out there all alone. If it were not for you, she would likely not have gotten herself lost. So, if you are quite done, I would like to get back to the business at hand. This is no work for a boy.”

“What am I to do?” asked Maximilian.

“As I said, stay out of my way. Please confine yourself to the lower level, and someone will have a room made up for you if this affair takes that long. As soon as the Duke does not want me watching you any longer, you will be out of this house. I do believe that Sophia will not want to speak with you at all after this. You would have made an awful husband for her—you have done nothing to protect the girl. Now, be off with you, and please do not disturb me again.”

“Of course,” said Maximilian. He left the room and wandered back to the sitting room where he had been served brandy. The butler was still waiting there and offered a nod when Maximilian entered the room. Maximilian sat back down in his chair, took a large swig of the brandy, and knew that he was as useless a man as they come.

\* \* \*

Sophia had fallen asleep sometime after being kidnapped, and when she woke, the hood was still over her head and the cloth in her mouth. She moved, opening and closing her eyes, but quickly realized that there was a covering on her head, and her legs and feet were bound. She tried to call out for help, but all that came out was a muffled moan. She wriggled on the floor and bumped into a wall.

The tears flowed and wet the fabric hood covering her head. She curled herself up into a fetal position and waited. It could have been minutes or hours later, she had no sense of time anymore, but footsteps came sometime after. Sophia’s eyes sprung open to find darkness again, forgetting about the hood.

Suddenly, a hand took her arm, and she was dragged to her feet. Sophia let out a muffled gasp. The figure beside her thrust her forward, her shoulder hitting the wall. The hood was wrenched from her head before she could make a sound, and though it was not overly bright in the room, her eyes had been covered for a long time, and she blinked them furiously to try and see who she was with.

“Sit down,” said a voice. A hand was on her shoulder, and she flinched back immediately. Sophia was guided down onto the floor, her hands still bound behind her back. She blinked again, wanting to rub her eyes but was unable to.

The room eventually came into focus—it was bare and without furniture. There were no windows, only a door on one side. It was open, and light flooded in, accompanying the light that came from the lantern of one of the two figures in the room. Sophia looked up at them, unable to shield her eyes from the harsh light.

She had expected someone brutish, but the two were dressed well and looked as if they could fit in with anyone from the ton or high society. Both wore permanent smiles, and in any other setting, the other occupant of the room would be put at ease, but Sophia was anything but. In this context, the smiles were chilling.

“Here is what you need to know,” said the first man, the one with hazel eyes and hair to match, wearing a navy jacket while the other wore black. “I have no need for your name, and you have no need for ours. You now belong to us. I promise you no pain if you do what I say, but failure to do so will result in punishment to match your crime, and seeing as we have kidnapped you and brought you here, I am sure that it will come as no surprise that we will gladly snuff out your life if it protects us.”

“Of course,” said the second man, the one with deep blue eyes, “we will do all that we can to protect an investment. We do not want to hurt you, but we will.”

“So, welcome,” added the third. “We hope that you enjoy your stay.”

Sophia blinked on the floor, looking up at the two men. She tried to say something, muffled by the cloth in her mouth. The man with the blue eyes reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, curved knife. He unsheathed it and stepped over to Sophia, crouching down beside her.

The man ran the knife gently across her neck, touching the skin but not cutting it. Sophia flinched a little but quickly stilled herself. He looked into her eyes for a moment before nodding his head slowly—she nodded too, acknowledging the message: do not make a sound, or the knife will cut. He moved the knife up to her mouth and pulled the cloth out.

Sophia took a deep breath as if she had been holding her breath the entire time. She took another to calm herself so that she did not scream—she believed that they would harm her.



“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Compliance,” said the man by her. “We already told you, do as we say, and you will live. Do anything else, and you will feel pain.”

“You cannot just do this. How long have I been here? My father will be out looking for me. Baron Vassiley will not stop until he finds me. You are going to be sorry that you took me! I swear that you will be the one who feels pain, and not me.”

“Very spirited,” said the man by the door, clapping his hands slowly. “They will like that up in Scotland.”

“Scotland,” whispered Sophia.

“You will be long gone before they find you, princess. Come on, get her on her feet; she has work to do.”

The man with the knife gave a smile and grabbed Sophia by the arm again, holding the knife in one hand. “We know where your father lives, and we know where the Baron lives. Try to escape from us, and one of them will die. I am not sure which one yet, but it will be a nice surprise for you. Are we making ourselves clear?”

Sophia nodded her head, unable to say anything. Her only thoughts were of escape, but she dared not try. She was held roughly and pulled out of the room. There was a smell of bleach coming from somewhere. She was taken to another room where three other girls were, maids by the looks of them.

“Change into this,” said the man. He looked Sophia up and down and chuckled before adding, “Do not worry, I am not going to watch you. That will come later.” The words sent a shiver running down her spine. The man quickly left the room, and there was the sound of a key in a lock.

Sophia took one look at the clothes that she was given and realized that the women in front of her were not maids. They could have been,

or they could be daughters of Dukes, just like her. They were all wearing the same clothes, and she was about to as well.

She turned to face the wall and started to undress, not knowing why she was doing it so willingly but continuing all the same. When she tried to reach for the buckles on the back of the dress, she felt a hand there. One of the girls, she could not be sure who, untied the dress at the back and helped her out of the clothes. Sophia had only done this with her maid before, and she pretended that was what was happening.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“They took me yesterday,” said the girl.

Sophia did not ask anymore. She knew that they were all in this together now—the others had been taken, and so had she. They were putting common maid clothes on, and that meant that they would be sold into slavery, but she did not know where. Her father and Baron Vassiley would come; she was sure of that. They would save her. One of them would make it. She had to keep believing.

There was whispering from behind, and Sophia turned now that she was fully dressed. She took a step closer to where the girls were now huddling—each of them looked as scared as she felt.

“They are sending us to Scotland,” one of them whispered, a small girl with bright red hair. “I heard them talking. It will not be for a few days, they mean for us to be sold into prostitution in the North. The brutes out there will be the death of us all.”

“*Y*our Grace,” said Maximilian. “You must forgive me for all of this. I am responsible for everything, and you can do with me whatever you wish.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Neville. He stood in the main foyer of Baron Vassiley’s home, looking around and becoming more and more annoyed.

“I should have agreed to marry your daughter. You thought it a good match, and I should have too. I should not have brought her to the city, nor should I have hidden anything from you. I am—”

“Will you stop talking,” said the Duke rather curtly. “You are not to blame.” He waved his hand in the air as if to dismiss this young man in front of him. The Baron’s front entrance was much more extravagant than his, and that annoyed him to no end.

“What will you have me do, Your Grace?” asked Maximilian.

“I do not care what you do!” shouted Neville. “Just do as the Baron asks you and leave me alone, will you.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” said Maximilian, looking down at the marble floor. “I will leave you alone.” He walked off with his shoulders slumped.

“I did not mean,” started the Duke. He did not blame Maximilian at all, but his frustrations were leaking out at the slightest thing. He wanted to call after Maximilian and tell him that he was sorry, but the

Baron appeared on the stairs—finally. Neville watched Maximilian go before turning his attention to Baron Vassiley, who was dressed even more elegantly than he was previously, and this also annoyed the Duke more than it should have.

“Your Grace,” said the Baron, walking down the stairs with his arms wide open. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Is it, Baron Vassiley? Is it a pleasure to see me again? This only means that my daughter has not been found yet.”

“I understand your frustrations, Your Grace, but rest assured that I will find your daughter if it is the last thing that I do. And when I do, we will be married to each other.”

“You understand my frustrations?” asked Neville. “Do you have a daughter?”

“I do not,” said the Baron.

“Then you have no idea how I feel,” said Neville. “My daughter has been missing for three days, and you have turned up with nothing. You continue to tell me that you will find her, yet there has been no word.”

“And may I ask how your people are doing with their search?” asked the Baron.

“Excuse me?” said the Duke, his face reddening and a small vein in the side of his neck sticking out.

“I do not mean to challenge you, Your Grace, but you have many more people out there than I do. They have not turned up with anything yet. I am doing all that I can to find her, and I am confident that I will, but London is a big city.”

The anger in Neville’s chest rose like a wave in a storm. “Do not take that tone with me, Baron Vassiley. This is my daughter that we are

talking about. You have only known her for a brief period. She is my entire life. Do not dare to question my people nor me. And do not make promises that you cannot keep.”

“I love Sophia, and I will do anything to find her,” said the Baron, his voice rising too. He took a step forward. “You may be her father, but I am her future. If she is lost to me, I do not know what I will do. If you dare to question my....” Baron Vassiley dropped down to his knees. “I am sorry, Your Grace. You must forgive me. I do not mean to raise my voice nor question you. I have been bereft since I was told of the news of her disappearance, and I have not been able to think straight.” The tears came from the Baron, and his head drooped forward.

Neville softened. “Get to your feet, man, you are.... I must apologize too. I know exactly how you feel, and I lashed out at you for no good reason. In a way, it warms me that you act like this. It shows your devotion toward my daughter. Please, take my handkerchief and get back to your feet. Neither of you needs to apologize, not you nor Maximilian.”

“That sneaky rogue,” said the Baron. “I do not know what I will do with him. I do not trust sending him out there, but I will keep my eye on him for you.” The Baron got back up and wiped his eyes with the handkerchief. “You must forgive my weakness.”

“I forgive it and understand it,” said Neville. “It has been days, and my daughter is still missing. I am at my wit’s end. Please find her for me, Baron Vassiley.”

“I will find her, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, that is all I came here to hear. Now, I must return to the search myself. Please excuse me.”

Baron Vassiley nodded his head and walked the Duke out.

The sky outside was still gloomy and grey, and Neville was sure that it would not brighten until he had his daughter back in his arms. The

coach door was opened, and he was soon on his way back to his London residence. The cobbled road caused the carriage to bump up and down as they traveled the mile between the two houses.

When Neville returned to the stately house, Julia was waiting inside for him, and she came running quickly to the main entrance to welcome him back.

“Any news?” she asked.

“No, not that I expected to hear any. I only wanted to make sure that the Baron was still putting all his efforts into the search for Sophia.” Neville looked around his home and compared it again to the Baron’s. The one thing that it told him was that the Baron had money, and that meant more resources for a search.

“How is Maximilian?” asked Julia, touching his arm gently. “Did you see him when you were there?”

“He is doing fine,” said Neville. He looked Julia in the eye. “I believe that he is doing all that he can to help the Baron find Sophia.” He did not have the heart to tell her that Maximilian blamed himself for Sophia’s disappearance or that he was not helpful in aiding the Baron.

He must not have hidden very well that he was lying to her, for there was a knowing look in her eye. Neville pulled her into his embrace before she could ask any more questions. He held her tight and soon felt her arms around his body.

“We will find her,” she whispered into his ear. Her hands moved up and down his back, and Neville wanted to stay there in the embrace forever, but he could not. His heart had taken a step back from this woman. He had to put his daughter first for now, but he knew that as soon as he had Sophia back, he was going to have to face his very real feelings for this woman who was capturing his heart.

“I have to go back out there,” said Neville, pulling away from the embrace.

“Again?” asked Julia, taking a step back. She folded her arms across her chest. “I cannot let you go out there again, Neville. There are dozens of people out there looking for your daughter, and one more is not going to make a difference.”

“Not make a difference? What is that supposed to mean?” asked Neville. He could feel the anger bubbling up inside of him again.

“It does not mean anything, and I do not appreciate that tone, Neville. I am doing all that I can to stop you from falling apart here, and you know it. You are pale and tired. Your knees ache constantly. You walk from place to place, hoping to find her, and I know that you do it so that you can feel you are doing something, but the best thing that you can do is to stay here and wait for her return.”

“You think that she ran away because of me,” said Neville before he could stop himself. Once the words were out of his mouth, he fully committed to following his train of thought. “I can see it in your eyes. You believe that I drove her away, do you not?”

“What are you talking about, Neville? I do not think that at all, and you know it.” Julia took another step back, tears coming to her eyes.

Neville could not stop the anger from rising within him. He had kept in check with Maximilian and Duke Vassiley, but it was becoming too much for him now. He did not blame Julia for any of this, but his mind would not let go of the thought that his daughter had not been the same since she had come along. Suddenly, something clicked in his mind, and he snapped.

“You did this!” he shouted.

“Neville, what are you talking about?”

“Your Grace,” said Neville.

“Excuse me?” asked Julia, a shocked look covering her face before it turned to a look of confusion. “What is going on, Neville?”

“I am a duke,” he said. “You will address me as Your Grace.”

“I do not understand where this is coming from,” said Julia. The tears were coming now, wetting her cheeks. “What is coming over you? What have I done to make you feel this way?”

“You drove her away,” said Neville, not believing the words that were coming out of his mouth. He wanted to stop talking, to wrap her up in his arms, but the rage had taken over. “You spoke with Sophia about getting an education. I would not allow it, but your words convinced her that she should go to the city without telling me. Now, she is lost, and it is all your fault.”

“Nev—Your grace, you cannot seriously think that. I would do anything for you and for Sophia. Neville... I love you.”

“Do not touch me,” said Neville, jerking his arm away as Julia tried to take it. “You poisoned my daughter’s mind, and now she is gone. She may never return, and that will be the end of my life. I do not need you here anymore, so you are free to go.” Neville turned away from her.

“Free to go? What is that supposed to mean.” Julia placed a hand on Neville’s shoulder, but it was quickly shrugged off. “Please do not do this, Neville.”

“There is a coach outside. It will take you back to your home. I will have Maximilian sent back as soon as I can. If you had not come into my life, she would still be with me.”

“Please, Neville. I cannot leave. You cannot make me leave. I love you, Neville. Please!”

“I do not care for you anymore, Julia,” said Neville, knowing that the words were a lie. “I think that it is best that you go. I cannot be distracted from finding her. Please do not make me say it again.”

“Neville,” whispered Julia.



Neville turned, the fire burning in his eyes. Julia jerked back instinctively, cowering from his glare.

“Go!” shouted Neville. “Get out of here and never come back!”

## Chapter 25

“*M*y love, my love, my love.”

The singing came from outside the house, and Julia immediately jumped to her feet with a large smile on her face. William would never admit to having a melodic voice, but it was the sweetest that Julia had ever heard. He would not sing in public, but he would sing for her, and for Maximilian at bedtime even though the boy was in his teens now. Maximilian pretended to dislike the singing when he was going to sleep, but Julia knew that their son would never tell his father to stop singing.

“Father!” shouted Maximilian, putting down his book and jumping up to his feet too.

*“My wife and son are waiting. My life has just begun, I am stating!”*

Julia burst out laughing. She had never heard any of his songs before and was sure that he made them up on the spot. She had not heard the carriage pull up, and he must have alighted at the coach house instead of the front door. He felt it a wasted trip to have the coachmen drop him at the door and then backtrack to park the coach for the night. It was the small, thoughtful things that endeared him to Julia.

*“The war has come and gone, and I have come back home, but the fight for my heart was won long ago.”*

“Oh, you crazy fool,” said Julia as she opened the door. She walked down the front steps and ran into his arms. William struggled to wrap his arms around her with flowers in one and a small package in the other.

"I am so glad that you have come home again," whispered Julia in his ear. "I have missed you more than ever, and I love you more than my heart can contain."

"I could hear the beating of your heart over the artillery and cries of war. It reached me over the barren lands, and that kept me going."

"You are the sweetest man I know," said Julia. She kept her arms wrapped around her husband, not wanting to let him go.

"And let me take a look at this young man," said William. He pulled back from the embrace and studied Maximilian. "I have only been gone a few months, but you are turning into a fine young gentleman."

"Thank you, sir," said Maximilian.

"You are going to make a fine husband one day, Max," said William. he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and looked down at him with evident pride.

In his uniform, he looked handsome and strong. It was not the uniform that he wore in battle, but a secondary one that was worn for travel and formal events. Julia ran her eyes over his body—he always looked his best when he was wearing it, even though she did not like to see him leave and go off to war. But, he was home now, and she would relish every day that she got to spend with him.

"I do not mean to be presumptuous," said Julia, "but would those be for me?" She eyed the beautiful flowers, the reds, and pinks with scattered yellows. Julia had told him time and time again that he should not waste his money on flowers for her, but he never heeded that advice, and she was glad that he did not.

William took a step toward his wife and kissed her. "Beautiful flowers for a beautiful lady," he said.

Julia blushed and looked demurely at the ground before a large smile came to her face. She took the flowers eagerly and held her nose close

to them, inhaling the intoxicating scent. Even when he was away, the smell of flowers would remind her of him.

“And this too,” said William with a shy smile on his face. Julia shook her head. He could not help himself from buying her presents when he was away. She took the gift from him and unwrapped the paper from the outside. There was a small case within, something like velvet but not that.

William moved to take the gift and Julia’s hands in his. “We had some time to see the north of France, and there were local artisans, and everyone was buying for their partners, so naturally, I had to buy one too.”

Julia shot him a look.

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I could not help myself because I love you so much.”

Julia smiled, and she opened the box, her husband’s hands still on hers. Inside, displayed on a cushioned pillow, was a silver necklace with a deep blue gemstone embedded into it.

“Do not worry,” said William. “It was not expensive. I mean, well, you know what I mean. I would have spent our life savings on it for you. When I saw it, the only beauty that matched it was your own.”

Julia smiled again. Maximilian stood observing the scene in silence, and she hoped that his father’s gentleness and romanticism would rub off on their son. She leaned forward and kissed her husband. “It is perfect, and so are you.”

Maximilian stood looking up at his father. There was an expectant look on his face, but he did not ask for anything. Julia could see that her husband’s hands were empty, but he did have a twinkle in his eye. William reached down to his belt and unbuckled a sheath.

“This is for you, Max,” he said. “It is a French dagger, taken from....”

The words hung in the air, and he did not complete the sentence.

Maximilian's eyes lit up, and he eagerly took the knife from his father, unsheathing it immediately and turning it over and over in the late morning sun. "Thank you." The grin on his face was wide, and Julia could not begrudge the gift, though she did raise an eyebrow at her husband, imagining how he had come into possession of it.

William did not give her time to think on it anymore, and grabbed her again, whirling her around in his arms before stepping and holding onto her tight. The sun had warmed the day, and birds chirped in the trees. It was the perfect day.

"We are so glad to have you home, William," said Julia. It had been a few hard months with him gone, constantly wondering if he would ever return.

"Yes," said William. There was a hesitation in his voice, and Julia knew immediately what was coming.

"Please do not say it," she whispered, thinking of Maximilian. "How long?"

"I have to be back out there in three days."

"Three days," she hissed through her tight lips. "You have only just come home. Can they not give you a little more time?"

"I do not make the rules," he said.

Julia wanted to shout and scream. Maximilian was playing with the knife, lost in a world where he was fighting for England, stabbing the knife and running around in circles, battling imaginary enemies.

"Maximilian, put that away for now and continue your reading," said Julia.

"Mother, I only just—"

“Now!” shouted Julia.

Maximilian looked up to his father and received a look that told him to do as asked. He shrunk down and put the knife back in the sheath, walking carefully with it toward the house.

“How are we supposed to live like this?” asked Julia once Maximilian was inside the house. She looked down at the flowers and the necklace and would much rather have her husband back than the constant gifts. “You have been gone for months, and now you tell me that you are leaving again in a couple of days.”

“What would you have me do, Julia? I do not make the schedules, and we knew what we were getting into when I signed up for the army. I have no education, and this life has been kind to us.”

“And Maximilian will grow up without a father,” said Julia.

“I am doing this so he can grow up to be whatever he wants to be. My father did not care about education, nor was he able to provide one for me, so now I have to do this. Maximilian will not have to risk his life as I do. Do you believe that I want to be over there and away from you and Max?”

“No, of course not,” said Julia.

“Well, that is how it sounds. I am the one who faces death each day, and you get to be here with our son, safe and without worry.”

“Without worry? I constantly worry about you. You are gone, and I am all alone. Do you think that I have it easy?”

“I am home for three days, and you want to fight with me. Why did I bother coming back at all?” asked William. His face was glowing red.

“That is how you feel?” shouted Julia.

“I do not have time for this!” shouted William. He did not leave any

time for a reply, turning on his heels and marching toward the stables.

Julia was fuming. She wanted to tear the flowers apart and throw the necklace into a lake. She did understand what he faced over there, and she knew he understood her plight, but the constant coming and going ripped her heart to shreds. She grabbed the stems of the flowers tighter in her hand and marched off in the other direction. The joy of the day was gone.

In the house, she found a vase for the flowers and added some water, placing them by the window to receive light through the day. She knew Maximilian would be reading in the library, but she could not be around anyone right now. She took the chair by the flowers and stared out into the sun-filled sky, opposing the darkness that had flooded her heart.

It must have been an hour later when William came to find her, and she did not notice him at first. It was not until he placed a hand on her shoulder, causing her to jerk in fright, that she knew he was there. The arm moved around her chest, and she shifted on the chair so that he could first sit down and then she could sit atop his lap. His other hand came around her midriff, holding her tenderly.

“I must apologize for my behavior,” he said. “You do not deserve to be treated like that.”

“No, it is I who must apologize,” said Julia. “I understand how hard it is for you to be over there, and I lost my temper. You are a wonderful man who does all he can to help our family.”

“We both do,” he said. “I fight to keep you both safe, and you have the persistence, endurance, and love to raise our child into a fine young man. He is lucky to have you as a mother, and I am the luckiest man alive to have you as my wife. If there were another way, I would find it, but there is not, and I hate to feel stuck.”

“You do all that you do out of love,” said Julia. “Let us both enjoy our time together while we have it. Will you sing me a song, my love.”



“I have just the one,” said William, kissing his wife on the cheek, and she was sure that he was about to make another one up on the spot. *“My time is precious, my wife delicious, and war is vicious, but love conquers all. And love is all we have, all we have, all we have. And I will return when all is done.”*

“Promise?” asked Julia.

William wrapped his arms tighter around his wife. “Promise that I will return? Of course, I do. I have not failed you yet, have I? I will return to you and Max, and I will be laden with more gifts.”

“Just bring you, William, and I will have all the gifts that I need.”

Julia believed everything that her husband said, but she could not help but worry that one day, he would not come back to her.

## Chapter 26

Julia stood by the coach, the coachman holding the door open for her. Neville had stormed off in the other direction, and she had no idea where he had gone. Likely, he had left the estate to go in search of his daughter again. Well, good riddance to him. He could do as he pleased, and Julia would not stand in his way anymore. He had made his feelings clear, and she was too angry to be upset by them.

The thoughts of her late husband came flooding back to her. They had argued many times over the years, but he had always been the one to come to her for reconciliation. They had never been apart from each other with a recent argument looming over their heads. Julia was certain that the Duke was not the type of man to admit that he was wrong.

After the argument with her husband when he had only been home for three days, the time together had been wonderful. He had left to go back to war, and she had never loved him more. William did not return after that. His body was never found, and his promise was broken. He had promised to return, and he had not. Julia's life was over.

"You foolish, stubborn man," she said, receiving a look of confusion from the coachman. "Sorry, not you," she added. The Duke was the one who was stubborn and foolish. Julia's life had been brightened again for a brief period of time, but this felt the same as when she had been told that William was not coming home. She had fallen in love with the Duke, she was sure of that, and he had ripped her heart from her chest. She was the foolish one—foolish to think that she could be happy with a man again. No matter what she did, they all left her. At least she still had Maximilian.

“I will not be leaving just yet,” she said to the coachman. She was met with a small nod from the young man, and he closed the door to the coach, taking up a position close to it.

She could not leave the estate just yet. A part of her hoped that Neville would come bounding out of the door to proclaim that he was wrong and in love with her, but as she stared at the large oak door, she knew it would not happen. And she was not going to go to him, not after the way that he had treated her.

She loved him, but he did not love her. Or did he? She hoped, but that hope was in vain now. Then there was Sophia to think about. Neville did not want Julia here, but she still cared for his daughter. That was all that she could think of at that moment. But Neville had made it clear that she was not a part of her life anymore, and she was going to oblige with the request.

The door was opened by the butler as she approached, and there was a look on his face that he tried to hide but could not. He had heard the argument between them, as had most of the staff. It was loud. He offered her a slight nod, and Julia stormed past him. She would not leave anything of hers here and would remove all traces of herself.

“I cannot believe that I thought them similar,” Julia muttered to herself as she stormed through the large house. “He brought me presents, but that is where the similarities end.” A maid was walking down the hallway toward her, and she moved out of the way as Julia approached. “Can you imagine the Duke singing? Can you imagine that?” asked Julia in a frenzy. The maid bowed her head and did not say anything.

“Ha,” muttered Julia. “He is nothing like William. I was so desperate to find someone to love me again that I gave into my feelings. It was not the Duke; it was only the first man to show any interest in me. I am a desperate, old woman, and it is no wonder that my life has ended up as it has.”

The tears did not come to her eyes—she was too far past that. The

emotions would come flooding later, but for now, the anger fueled her in her quest. Julia went straight to the maids' area and found some cleaning equipment. She was met with confused looks as she made her way around the house, cleaning and dusting anything that she had touched, going over entire rooms, just in case.

She grabbed her bag and packed all of her belongings into it, what little she had brought with her. When she was done, she stood at the top of the bed that she had shared with Neville. She had seen the portrait of his wife and imagined them in the bed together. Gloria was a beautiful woman, much more beautiful than she was—she had deluded herself into thinking that she was good enough for a man like the Duke.

“The sheet,” she said. Julia pulled off the blankets and smelled them. She could not detect her scent, but that did not matter. She pulled off all of the sheets and blankets, the pillow coverings too. She did not want to take them to the maids; she wanted to be sure that they would be dealt with before making the bed again.

Taking the largest sheet, she bundled everything into it and gathered up all four corners, slinging the bundle over her shoulder. Julia knew that she looked ridiculous, but she did not care. She stormed back through the house, gaining more confused looks, but no one stopped her or said a word.

Julia had walked the streets for hours with Neville, and she had gained some semblance of where things were. It was a long walk, but she had seen the steam coming from the top of the stone building and knew that there was a laundry an hour's walk from the estate. That was exactly what she needed.

Stalls lined the streets she walked and people gathered around them in eager conversation. Slowly, her anger came under control, especially when she caught her reflection in a window and almost burst out laughing. She looked like a well-dressed hobo with the sheets strung on her back. When she reached the laundry building, Julia was able to think straight again.

This was a clean start. She would have the sheets laundered, and then she would be out of the Duke's life for good. She was only glad that she had found out his true feelings before falling for him anymore. She did love him, but she had lived with lost love for years. What were a few more?

\* \* \*

Maximilian could not sit still. The Baron had no trust in him, and neither did the Duke. He could not even talk to his mother—she was enamored by the Duke now, and she would be of no help anymore. It was at times like these that he wished his father was here. His father was a soldier, a decisive man who knew what to do in times of war. Even in peaceful periods, he was a man who knew how to get what he wanted, not that he ever wanted for much.

Maximilian's fingers found their way to the knife on his belt. It was the last thing that his father had ever given him, and he had treasured it more than anything else in the world. It was not his father's, taken from a French soldier as he had died, but it was a memory, and that was worth more than anything in the world.

"What would you do if you were here, Father? What would you have me do?" Maximilian tried to picture his face, closing his eyes and remembering the smile that he always had on his lips when he came home from the war. His mother had never fully recovered from that, but he could see the happiness that the Duke brought to her.

"You would not sit back and wait, not when someone was in trouble," whispered Maximilian. He looked up at the butler, who had an impassive look on his face. He could hear everything that Maximilian was saying but showed no reaction at all. "I have to confront the Baron."

Maximilian took a sip of the brandy that was still in the glass for courage and went off to find the Baron. It had been a while since he had met with the Baron in his study, but Maximilian had not heard the man leave, and he needed to confront him. He would demand to

be a part of the search or be released from the Baron's care. He knew that he could leave if he wanted to, but he did not want to upset the Duke.

Fueled with a new purpose and some warm Brandy, Maximilian strode confidently through the halls of the Baron's estate, looking for the man. He kept one hand on the dagger, hoping that he could somehow emulate his father and the bravery that he had shown in life.

When Maximilian closed in on the study, he could see the light flickering from within, and he lost some of his resolve. He stopped walking, gripped the dagger tighter—not that he had any intention of using it—and continued on before he lost his nerve completely. Without stopping, he marched purposefully to the room and rounded the corner, standing stoically in the doorway. He found the study completely empty.

Maximilian took a deep breath, both relieved not to have the confrontation but saddened that he would have to try again. The study was well kept and neat, except for the letters scattered across the desk. He had been in many houses and estates over the years, mainly due to the balls that his mother had taken him to, but this was one of the most extravagant.

It was not the size, which was smaller than many houses—though large for a house in the center of London. It was the furnishings and embellishments. There were artworks, busts of war heroes, and fabrics that had obviously come from overseas. The Baron had either come from money, been incredibly successful in business, or both. He looked to have even more money than the Duke had, and the Duke was a rich and powerful man.

Maximilian should have left, but he found himself drawn to the desk. He could picture the scene when he had visited the Baron, and there were only blank sheets of paper at the time. Now, there were three letters sitting on the desk. Maximilian knew that they would contain information about the search for Sophia, and if the Baron was not here to tell him, the letters might.

With a quick look at the door, Maximilian scooped up the first and started to read. The letter contained nothing about Sophia, only details of a shipment of fabrics. The second only contained business information too, and the third detailed money that was owed. Maximilian looked over the three letters again and became incredulous. He could not believe that the Baron was dealing in business when his future wife was missing. To be successful, business dealings had to be put before many things, but never love.

The Baron had berated Maximilian and had told him that he was delaying the finding of Sophia, but now there was this. Maximilian studied the paper, just to be sure, and was certain that the ink was fresh. Instead of writing letters to further the search for Sophia, Baron Vassiley had focused on business matters.

Maximilian was furious. His hand went to his dagger again, but this time with more intent. He wanted to find the Baron, no matter where he was. He was going to demand to help in the search for Sophia, and he was going to confront the Baron about his priorities. If he loved his business more than Sophia, then the man had no right to marry her.



## Chapter 27

Sophia spent the first few hours in captivity crying. There had been more talk about being sold into prostitution in Scotland, but she still could not believe that would happen to her. This was not the type of thing that happened to people, and especially not someone like her, the daughter of a Duke. She brought her knees up to her chest and covered her head with her hands. The tears came again, only a few drops—her eyes dry from all of the tears that had come before.

One by one, the other girls had been taken from the room, sometimes by one of the two men who had removed the hood from her head, and presumably the ones who had taken her from the streets of London. Other times, it was by more well-dressed men who brandished knives. Now, she was all alone in the room, waiting for someone to come to her. The other girls had said that they would be shipped to Scotland in a few days, and that meant that she had time to be rescued or time to escape, though she held little hope of either now.

The room was small, but there was still room for eight bundles of hay on the floor with a blanket covering each. A second blanket was set on top. This is where she had slept, though she could not be sure if she slept through the night or only a few minutes. Some of the girls talked to each other, and some remained quiet. Sophia had remained silent so far.

The door to the room flew open, and Sophia gasped. A new man stood there, one that she had not seen before, but still one who was well-dressed. A lantern had been left in the room, but there were no windows, and Sophia shielded her eyes from the natural light flooding in. The lantern had been set low, most likely to consume less fuel.

“Get up,” said the man. He was younger than the others, and the way he spoke was not as harsh as the older men who had come for the previous girls.

“Please,” said Sophia.

“Get up,” repeated the man.

Sophia did as she was told. The previous men had brandished knives when they had come for the girls, but he did not have one in his hand. Sophia knew that this did not mean that he did not have one on his person, and she did not want to risk being harmed.

“You have been warned about escaping,” said the young man. “I am here to give you a further warning. You have met the other girls in this room. If you try to run away, whether you escape or not, they will all be beaten as punishment. If you do or say anything, they will all be beaten. Do you want to be responsible for that?”

Sophia stood in front of the man and did not say anything, merely shaking her head.

“Good,” said the man. “We also know where you live, and if you escape from here, we will find you, and we will harm those who you love. We have done this for a long time, and you are naive if you believe that the constables will be able to do anything for you. We have money, and they have wants. We find that the two go hand in hand.”

Sophia watched him as he talked. He had immaculate clothing and reminded her of someone. She ran her eyes across his face and listened to how he spoke. It was the Baron. He reminded her of the man she loved. He had a softness and a gentility that the others did not possess, and she could see that there was some goodness in him.

“Please,” she said. “I came to the city to find love; you must understand that. My love is out there looking for me, and he is the most wonderful man I know. You remind me of him, and I know that

there is goodness in your heart.”

“Do not attempt to use words to sway me,” said the young man. “They all say the same thing, in their own way. Some beg, others profess how scared they are, and others try to seduce, but it is all a con, a way to get out of here. I am sorry, but there is no way out.”

The way he said sorry made Sophia believe that he genuinely was sorry.

“Help me,” she begged, stepping toward him and grabbing his arm. She held the grip and looked into his eyes, hoping for anything. The young man held her gaze for a minute before jerking his arm away.

“Nice try,” he said, pulling a knife from his belt. “Do not touch me again. Now, come with me, and let us get started.”

Sophia followed the young man, and allowed herself to be led from the room. She had hoped for anything and had gotten something. She had seen a look in his eye, a flicker of compassion. He was not like the others, and she had to believe that there was a way to get across to him.

As they left the room, the other men were there, sitting around a table playing cards. She could not say anything in their presence, could not do anything to jeopardize being separated from the young man. If no one was coming for her, he was her last hope, as foolish as that was. But, there was nothing else to cling to.

“Through here,” said the man, touching the tip of his knife to her back. Sophia jerked in fright and walked forward. The large room on the other side was gloomy and nearly lit, but it did not take much light to see what it was. There were large tubs of water dotted around the room, and over each, a woman was washing clothes. She recognized some of the women from her room and a few others. Each was hard at work, and Sophia realized why she had been brought from the bedroom.

“There are two rules,” said the young man. “You are to speak to no one—no sounds whatsoever. Rule two is to do your work. Either you know how to wash clothes and linens, or you will learn quickly. Watch what one of the other girls is doing and copy that. Failure to adhere to the rules and, well, you can guess what will happen to you.”

Sophia nodded her head again.

“Now, see that spare basin over there? I’ll take you to it, and you will work until nightfall. Do as you have been asked, and there will be no problems.”

“Thank you,” said Sophia. This seemed to surprise the young man. “Thank you for being nice to me,” she added. His expression changed as he led her over to the basin, and he stood beside her for a moment before he walked away. Sophia could see that he did not belong here. He was not like the others, and she hoped that was her saving grace.

\* \* \*

Maximilian could not sit still. He had gone back to the drawing-room after reading the letters but not before searching the estate for the Baron. All he had found out was that the Baron had left the residence, though no one knew where he had gone. Now, Maximilian was waiting for his return, drumming his fingers against the table. The butler still stood in the corner of the room, observing the proceedings.

Another brandy had been poured and was almost consumed. Maximilian held onto the handle of the dagger on his belt and felt the spirit of his father coursing through him. He picked up the nearly empty glass on the table and drained the remainder.

“I need a coach,” he said to the butler.

“Sir, I have been instructed by the Baron to watch over you until he returns.”

“And I need to talk to the Duke of Edinbran about his daughter. The

Duke is the one I am in the service of, and I do not think it wise to cross him, do you? His daughter is missing, and I believe that I know where she is,” Maximilian lied. “Do you want him to find out that you hampered his search for his daughter? I do not believe that the Baron will be able to save you then.”

Maximilian held the butler’s gaze, and he could see the man thinking. “Of course, sir. I will have a coach brought to the front promptly. I will let the Baron know where you are on his return.”

“I would expect nothing less,” said Maximilian. “Thank you.”

The butler nodded his head and moved quickly off to relay the commands. Maximilian let out a deep breath. He thought about pouring himself another brandy to consume, but he already felt a little intoxicated, the brandy working through his system and the thrill of deception adding to that. He did not like to lie, but needs must.

Maximilian went to the window, which looked out at the entrance of the estate. He hoped that the Baron would return before he left so that he could confront him, but there were no carriages on approach. He moved quickly to the front door, opening it himself and awaiting the arrival of the coach. The butler did his job admirably, and the two coachmen rounded the corner from the rear of the house with a coach a moment later.

It was shortly after that Maximilian found himself on the road and off to meet with the Duke. He only hoped that the man was at home. As he was driven through the streets of London, he kept watch out of the window. Perhaps Sophia would be wandering the streets, and he could be the one to find her. He could be redeemed for all that he had caused.

The streets were busy, but none of the faces belonged to Sophia. He loved her, but not in the way that the Baron did. She had become like a sister to him, and he loved her as such. He would do all that he could to find her, and then he would get out of Baron Vassiley’s way. She would be happy with him, he knew that, but he would not be a

part of that life.

Maximilian cursed himself when he realized that he had been daydreaming. The coach slowed and pulled up at the Duke's London residence. Maximilian shook his head, his anger rising. No wonder the Duke despised him as much as he did. The door was opened, and Maximilian stepped down onto the hard earth below.

The door to the house flew open, and the Duke bounded out, his face filled with anger and pain. Maximilian wished he had not come now. What news did he have that would be helpful at all? Only that the Baron had written some business letters. Why would that interest the Duke at a time like this? How would that help him to find his daughter?

"Have they found her?" asked the Duke of Edinbran.

"No, Your Grace. Sorry, I should not have come."

"My good man, is your mother with you?" The Duke continued down the front steps and almost ran to Maximilian.

"My mother?" asked Maximilian. "She was with you."

"I have lost both of them, and it is all my fault."

"What has happened?" asked Maximilian, trying to make sense of the situation.

"I sent her home. I thought that she was blaming me for Sophia leaving, but she was not. Yet it *was* my fault. I drove Sophia away, and I should have listened to her. Now, I have driven Julia away too. I cannot do this alone."

Maximilian quickly caught up as best he could and was at a loss as to what to do with the Duke. The man was a shell of his former self, lost and broken. Maximilian did the only thing that he could think of, and he embraced the Duke. He held him tight, just as his father used to

hold him when he was a boy. The Duke felt smaller in his arms, a man grieving for a tremendous loss.

“I sent her home,” said the Duke quietly. “I love the woman and treated her worse than I treated anyone else. I should have told her how I felt instead of taking my anger out on her. Now, she will never return to me. I have ruined my own life.”

“No,” said Maximilian, breaking the embrace and holding the Duke by the shoulders. “She knew. I believe that she knew how you felt, and I could see that she loved you too. You cannot give up on her, not when she feels for you what she felt for my father. If you truly care for her, you will go to her.”

“I need to find my daughter,” said Neville.

“And I am here to help,” said Maximilian. “We will find your daughter; I promise you that.”

“I have heard that before, but I have not believed it until now. You are a good man, Maximilian. If your father were here today, he would be proud of you.”

“You do not know how much that means to me, Your Grace,” said Maximilian. It was his turn for tears to come to his eyes, and he quickly wiped them away. “We will find your daughter, and then you will find my mother and tell her how you really feel. The two of you are meant to be together; I can see that clearly.”

“Thank you,” said Neville. “You came here to help with the search?”

“Yes, but more than that,” said Maximilian. He thought of his mother and father, of Sophia, the Duke and his late wife, and the way he felt for his own sweet songbird. Sophia loved the Baron unconditionally, but the reverse was not true. “Do you believe in true love?”

“I do,” said Neville. “I had that with Sophia’s mother. And I had it with....”



“Sophia believes in it too, but I do not believe that Baron Vassiley loves your daughter as much as someone should love another. We will find your daughter, and she will surely be reunited with Baron Vassiley, but I must implore you, Your Grace—you cannot allow your daughter to marry that man.”

“*I* need to have these washed as soon as is humanly possible,” said Julia, handing over the bundle to the man behind the counter.

“Of course, madam,” said the man, flashing her a wide and warm smile. He took the bundle and unwrapped it slightly, nodding as if they received bundles like this every single day. He poked through it for a second with a thoughtful look before handing the bundle over to the younger man beside him, who took it to the back.

The man scribbled down something on a receipt. “We do not normally have such clean clothes come our way. We can have them washed quickly, madam, but drying always takes longer, though we can expedite that for a small cost.”

“Whatever it takes,” said Julia. “I do not care of the cost, only that the clothes are ready as soon as possible.”

“As you wish,” said the man. “I hope this is not too much.” He pushed the receipt across to Julia with a number written on it.

“It is more than I expected, but speed is of the essence.” Julia did not want to spend a minute more in the city and wished to be gone as soon as she could.

“As you request, madam,” said the man, giving her another smile. Under any other circumstances, she might think that he was flirting with her, but she had lost that confidence. After what had happened with the Duke, she had no intentions of ever pursuing another man

ever again.

“I will return in a few hours,” said Julia. She took the receipt and left. The streets were busy, and the area was filled with smoke that hung around above the buildings and steam that dissipated as quickly as it arrived. A whistle sounded every few minutes somewhere off in the distance, so it was muted. A market must have been nearby, for there were shouts from someone hawking fresh fruits.

Julia wanted to peruse the shops and buy some food or perhaps a new dress to cheer herself up, but the motivation was not there. She wandered the streets instead, finding a bench to sit on in a park. No matter where she looked, there seemed to be couples holding hands. She knew that it was a trick of the mind, that she was only seeing the thing that she was looking for, but it did not help her feel any better.

She wanted to be able to help Neville, to find his daughter, to go crawling back to him and say that it was all her fault that he had snapped, but she knew that it was not and that he was the one to blame. He was the one who did not want her back, and even if it had been said in anger, there had been intent behind it, and he would not have said it if he did not believe it in some way.

No, her dreams of finding another man were over. She had hid behind her own insecurities, convincing herself that she did not deserve to find someone again, that she was too old and plain. It was foolishness, and she was only now realizing that she had always wanted a man, that there was a yearning that had always resided deep in her heart. But now, she would not seek it again. She had loved and lost, and that losing streak had only continued.

As if to make her feel worse, the world did its best to be glorious and beautiful. More and more couples walked before her, the sun peeked out from the clouds, warming the park below, and birds and squirrels both chirped in the trees. There was the laughter of children, running among the tree trunks, giggling mostly and sometimes shouting. It was the kind of day that she wanted to spend with Neville, but that had been taken from her, cruelly whipped out of her grasp.

Julia sat there for hours. She planned to go back as the sun lowered behind the buildings, but she did not have the energy, and she waited a little longer until the sun had disappeared, the light still hovering over the city, and clouds streaking with pink. The laundry shop would be closing soon, and she finally got back up and walked blindly back the way that she had come.

She felt lost in the city and could not imagine how Sophia would be feeling. She had been missing for a long time, and Julia was starting to worry that she was not merely trying not to be found but could not be found. There were some uncouth sorts who lurked in the bad parts of the city, and Julia shuddered at the thought that one of them might have gotten their hands on Sophia.

“Be strong, Sophia,” she whispered to herself as she made it back to the shop. The streets had thinned, and she worried for a moment that they were locking up shop for the night, but it was merely one of the men washing the door. He tipped his hat and opened the door as she approached.

The man behind the counter recognized her, and he pulled out the freshly laundered bundle from under the counter. It had been tied with a ribbon, the fabric tied so that it could be easily carried in one hand.

“Thank you,” said Julia. “A fresh start.”

“I can only wish you well,” said the man, obviously not understanding what she was talking about but having the good graces not to question her.

Julia paid for the laundry and walked toward the door. There was a burst of excitement from behind, and a man exited from the door to the backroom, shouting at someone else inside. Shouts came from inside, too, the argument in full flow. The man behind the counter grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck and forced him back through the door, whispering something through gritted teeth. The man quietened and stopped shouting, the shouting from within

stopping too.

“I must apologize,” said the man, returning to the desk.

“That is quite alright,” said Julia. She turned and walked out as the man held the door for her. When she was a few paces away, she stopped and breathed deeply.

The door was only opened briefly, but she was sure that she had seen her. Near the back of the room, in the dim light of a lantern, Julia was sure that she had seen the terrified face of Sophia.

She had read about people being taken and forced to work for no pay, but she could not imagine how Sophia had become embroiled in that. She had to tell the Duke. No, she had to make sure that it was Sophia first. It had been dark, and the door had only been open briefly. If she had not seen Sophia, she would not have thought anything of it. The place looked like a regular laundry with women working, and there was no suggestion that they were being kept there against their will.

Julia turned before she could think about it. Her feet took her back to the shop, and the door was opened for her again. “Something the matter?” asked the man at the door.

Julia caught the eye of the man at the desk when she entered. “Yes, there is something the matter,” said Julia, emboldened by her rebuke from the Duke. “Do you see that?” Julia pulled out one of the sheets and pointed to a spot on it. There was obviously nothing there, but that did not stop her from keeping going.

“Madam, I do not see anything,” said the man behind the desk.

“My sheet is ruined!” shouted Julia. “What kind of idiotic girls do you have working here?” Julia could not believe how she was acting, but she dived deep into it. “I cannot believe that I have to take this home to my husband. He will be livid; you can be sure of that.”

Julia’s voice rose, and just as she hoped, it attracted the attention of

some of the men in the backroom. The door was opened, and she took her chance. She glanced into the room and pointed. "Who did this?" she demanded. Julia did not wait for a response. She grabbed the sheet from the counter and bounded past the man at the wooden door. He reached for her, but she was past him before she could be grabbed.

"Did you do this?" she asked angrily to the first woman she came across, holding the sheet to her face. "Are you satisfied with this work?"

Everyone was stunned, and Julia worked her way to the back of the room before she could be turned around. "You? Was it you? How about you?" Julia worked her way quickly toward Sophia, seeing it was most definitely Neville's daughter. She reached her at speed, standing between her and the men behind.

"What is going on? We have to get out of here," whispered Julia.

Sophia stood stunned for a moment. Up close, she was less recognizable than from a distance. She had only been missing for a few days, but she had aged in years. There were a couple of strands of grey in her hair, masked slightly by the grime. Dark smudges darkened her face, and it was obvious that she had not been allowed to wash. Her clothes were those of a commoner.

Worst of all was how thin she had gotten. Julia wanted to take her home and feed and bathe her. There was fear in her eyes, and Julia almost took her hand to lead her out of the building.

Sophia finally found her wits and spoke. "Please, you have to leave. If they see me talking with you, they will beat me. They will do the same to the others, and they will find my father and the Baron and hurt them too. Go quick or they will take you too."

"Does this pass for skilled work!" shouted Julia, knowing that the men would be converging on her. She leaned closer to Sophia with the sheet and whispered, "I will come back for you. Everyone is out looking for you, and you will be found. I will go to your father now."

Sophia only nodded her head almost imperceptibly, the fear in her eyes increasing.

“Oh, forget it!” shouted Julia, whirling around and snapping the sheet in the air. The men had almost reached her, and she was sure that one of them was reaching for something in his belt. “If this is the type of service that you receive here, then I will not be coming back.” She stormed away from Sophia, barging past the men who had come to lead her out, her heart racing faster than it ever had.

No one grabbed her as she passed, but that did not help her not to be deathly afraid. She could see the fear on each of the girls’ faces, and they had all stopped working to observe the scene. The smell of bleach in the air was strong, and the heat from the fires drying clothes at the side of the room was causing Julia to sweat, though she was sure that was not all that was causing the sweat.

“I have never felt more insulted in my life,” said Julia, storming back out into the front area. She walked over to the counter and grabbed the rest of her laundry, crudely bundling it together and taking it under her arm.

“I still do not understand the anger, madam,” said the man behind the desk, some of the friendliness gone from his tone. He looked to the door to the backroom where two men were standing, and he gestured with his hand. They quickly scurried back and closed the door. The man then looked toward the man at the door, holding his gaze for a moment. “If you would allow us to rectify the mistake, we would be happy to.”

Julia took a shaky breath. She did not want to run even though her head was telling her to do exactly that. “I will not bother you anymore,” she said. “I will not be coming back here; you have my word.” She stormed toward the door, another customer inside looking at her with a bemused expression. Once more, the front door was opened for her, and she passed back into the outside world.

She walked quickly, not breaking into a run. When she rounded the

corner, she finally let out a breath, her entire body shuddering. She took two deep breaths before walking again. She had no time to lose. She had created a scene in there, and that would put them on edge. They were obviously keeping Sophia against her will, along with the other women in there. She had to get to Neville, and they had to gather as many men as possible to go down there. The men in the laundry had weapons; she was sure of that.

Julia thought about tossing the sheets so that she could try and run all the way back to Neville's estate, and she looked around for a coach that could take her to the Duke's house quicker, but the streets were quiet.

A pang of happiness ran through her. She had ended things on bad terms with the Duke, but this was the answer to all of her prayers. The Duke would be relieved to be reunited with his daughter again, and his anger would leave. He would realize his mistake, and he would take her back. She would not be blamed. No, she would be the heroine of this tale.

Suddenly, her life was back on track.

Julia was almost half the distance back to the Duke's house when she had an eerie sensation, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. The streets had gotten a lot quieter, and she no longer felt safe. A glance behind showed no one on the street, and that caused her fear to increase. Then there was movement. A man rounded the corner.

She did not recognize him until he had taken a few steps. She could not see his face clearly, but she recognized the clothing. It was the man who had held the door open for her at the laundry. As he took a few steps more, Julia could see that he had a wicked smile on his face. He tossed an apple into the air, caught it, and took a bite.

Julia turned and ran for her life.



Julia dropped the bundle of sheets onto the cobbled streets and took off as fast as her legs would take her. She was getting on in years, but fear was a good motivator, and she was sure that her life depended on her outrunning this man. Not only her life, but Sophia's too.

She rounded the corner and hoped that someone would be there, but the street was also empty. Julia did not dare glance behind her, yet she could feel him there, almost breathing down her neck. She was not sure how far it was to the Duke's residence, but she had no hope of making it there before she was caught. Already, her feet and legs were experiencing pangs of pain.

It was deathly quiet, and that heartened Julia as she slowed to a jog, unable to maintain her pace any longer. The silence meant no footsteps behind her, and she braced herself for a glance back. There was no one there. Julia knew that there was no chance of her making it to the Duke's house without being caught. She had to hide.

She took one more glance behind, finding no one there. The alley to her left was open and inviting, and she ducked down it, using the last of her energy to run to the middle and crouch behind two large garbage cans. She pressed herself to the ground and listened.

A cat mewed somewhere. Julia lifted her hand to find some grime stuck to it. The place was filthy, and the aroma matched the look. Something was rotten down there, and there was garbage strewn across the alley as if it had been tossed and forgotten about. Julia continued to crouch, and she offered a prayer to the heavens above.

She had always believed in a higher power, and she needed all the help that she could get. She prayed for her own safety and the safety of Sophia, mouthing the words silently.

There was a scuff from the entrance of the alleyway, and Julia did not dare look to see if it was the man. The noise seemed to pass, and there was silence again. Still, she did not move. She would not class herself as being street smart, but she knew better than to come out straight away—she was prepared to wait until it was dark before revealing herself. The scuff came again, followed by the most terrifying noise she had ever heard.

“Oh, my,” said the man, sending shivers racing up Julia’s spine. Nothing had ever made her more afraid than those simple words did as she hid. “Oh, my,” he repeated, his footsteps getting louder. “You make it so easy for me. For a moment there, I thought that you did not want to get caught. I was enjoying the chase. And now, you hide down this alleyway with no means of escape.”

Julia looked behind her to find that there was a brick wall at the other end of the alley. The bile rose in her throat, and she almost threw up, only just managing to keep it down.

“Stand up. Come on, I want to see you again. I know that you are hiding behind those cans.” The voice was silky smooth, and that only disturbed Julia more. Her legs were shaking, but that did not stop her from standing.

“Do not lay a finger on me,” she said, her hands raised in front of her. The sun was beginning to set, and the pinks had turned to orange, the light starting to dim in the alley. “If you take one more step toward me, I will scream.”

“Scream, and not only will you meet a painful death, but Sophia will meet one too. She is who you barged in there to talk with, was she not?”

“I do not know what you mean. I was dissatisfied with the job done on

my laundry, and now you are following me home. My husband will not be happy.”

“Come on,” said the man, stepping forward some more. “Why do you have to lie to me. I have been nothing but truthful with you. You spoke with Sophia, and that means that she needs to be punished—you too.”

Julia took a step back, quickly realizing that there was nowhere for her to go. The man was well-dressed and well-spoken. He had been a gentleman and opened the door for her with a smile. In the darkness, his energy changed, and he looked sinister and threatening, shadows covering his face.

“I will not tell anyone a thing, please,” whimpered Julia.

The man drew a knife, and Julia took another step back. “I take no pleasure in this,” said the man. “No, that was foolish of me to say. We already said that there should be no lies between us. I take great pleasure in this, and I cannot wait to see the true terror on your face.” He stepped forward again and stood so close that Julia could smell him.

He may have been perfumed, but his breath stunk. It made Julia want to retch again, and when he smiled, he displayed black teeth, some of them rotting. “You are not so bad looking for an old woman,” he said, moving the knife up to her cheek and moving the hair out of her face with the blade. “Perhaps we can have some fun before we go back.”

“Do not touch me,” said Julia, looking down. “I am not going back there with you.”

“We can have fun, and I can leave you here if you wish, but I do not believe that you imagined ending your life this way, did you?”

“I....”

“Just give in to it. I will be gentle with you, darling.” The man

reached his hand up and cupped her breast, moving the hand with the knife down between her legs.

Julia shook her head frantically. She could take it no longer. Her hand flew up and struck the man across the cheek. She did not care if he killed her here—what he wanted to do was a fate worse than death. She kicked out, too, catching him squarely between the legs. He crumpled and fell to his knees. Julia found her strength again and ran.

The laughter from the man echoed through the alley, chilling Julia to the bone, and that fueled her. She ran faster than she ever had before, the light at the end of the alley the answer to her prayers. She ran out into the waning sunlight, finally free, and an arm caught her around the neck, yanking her back and choking the breath from her. Another hand quickly clamped around her mouth before she could scream out, not that she was able to with the wind knocked from her.

The last thing that she saw before she was knocked unconscious was two well-dressed men with gentle smiles. Behind them, the man with the knife was slowly getting to his feet with a wicked smile on his face.

\* \* \*

Sophia had hope again. She had immediately gone back to work, washing the basin full of shirts, working harder than she had before, and trying to show no signs that she knew the woman who had come to shout at her. Inside, the excitement was turning her stomach. They knew where she was now, and they would come for her soon. Julia had found her, whether through luck or something else, and she was to be saved instead of being sold into prostitution.

There was more chatter among the men, and she could not catch all of what they were saying, but she was sure that they were going to be moved from the city quicker than had been planned. It was turning into a race against time. When they finished up work for the day and were led back to the room, Sophia grew more hopeful again. If they were worried about the incident in the washroom, they would have

moved them immediately. Her father and the Baron would come for them soon, and not only her but all of the girls would be saved.

Back in the room, food was brought to them, and Sophia was happy to see that the young man was the one who had been designated the task. He handed a plate to the girl beside her, and she caught his eye.

“You do not have to do this,” whispered Sophia. There was another man by the door, but he was too far away to hear. The young man stopped in his tracks and stared at her. There was sympathy in his eyes but fear too. “What is your name?” asked Sophia.

“Walter,” he whispered.

“My name is Sophia. It is nice to meet you, Walter.” She held out her hand, but he did not take it, glancing behind him and walking quickly to the door. He came back soon after with two more plates, handing one to Sophia and one to another woman.

“What did they do to you?” asked Sophia. “You do not want to do this, do you? They are forcing you to do this, but you can change that. You can be a hero.”

“I am not a hero,” he said. Sophia smiled slightly at him and tilted her head, engaging him with as pleasant an expression as she could. “I deserve all the punishment that is coming to me.” As he spoke, he seemed eager to unload his problems. “I betrayed my family, and I can never take that back. I will not betray them again. I am sorry, but I cannot help you.”

“Hey,” said the man by the door.

Walter left again, and Sophia waited until he came back with two more plates, handing them to two more women but making a point to walk past Sophia again.

“You do not belong here,” said Sophia. “You are gentle and kind. You take obvious care of yourself. I know a man just like you, and he is a

Baron. You would make a fine Baron, Walter.”

“I have known Barons, and they are not all good men,” he said. He paused for a moment, obviously thinking back to a more painful time in his life.

“Not all men are good, that is true, but I know a man who is. Two, in fact. One is a Baron, and the other is a Duke.” Sophia wanted to tell him that they were coming for her, but she was unsure if he would tell the others. She felt some trust between them, but he was also one of her captors. “They can help you, Walter.”

“No one can help me,” he said, leaving the room again.

It had been a few hours since Julia had visited, and Sophia was becoming more and more worried that something had happened. Perhaps her father was assembling men so that they could storm the building. Or, perhaps something had happened to Julia. Sophia tried to stay positive, but it was hard.

Walter came back in with two more plates for the final two girls. He handed them over and stopped close to Sophia. She was sure that he wanted to help her, that he was a good man in a den of thieves; she just needed to convince him of this. If he helped her, helped them all, her father and the Baron would help him; she was sure of that. And if they did not, she would make them.

“The Baron is a powerful and rich man,” whispered Sophia. “He loves me dearly and will do anything for me. My father is a Duke, and he would die before anything happened to me. They will help you. Whatever happened to you in the past, whatever you did, they can help to make it right. I promise you that, Walter. You do trust me, do you not?”

Walter took a quick glance around. “I do,” he whispered. He shook his head as if he doubted the words coming from his mouth. “You cannot change the past.”

“No, but you can change your future. You will be caught, Walter, all of you will be caught, and when that happens, you will be imprisoned or worse. No one will be able to help you then. I am trying to help you, Walter, but you need to help yourself. You are responsible for your actions, even if you were forced into this.”

“Hey, what are you doing over there?” asked the man by the door.

“Coming,” shouted Walter. He turned back to Sophia, shaking his head. “Please do not talk to me. I know what I have to do, and you cannot muddle me with your words. You do not care for me, so stop trying to manipulate me.”

“Walter,” said Sophia, but she could not add anything else before he left the room. She could see that he was in pain. Walter was as much a prisoner here as she was. She was sure that Baron Vassiley and her father would help him, but perhaps he was beyond help.

Sophia bit into the hard bread, taking a sip of water to wash it down. The cheese was moldy, and she scraped off as much of the mold as she could before nibbling on it. The smell made her gag a little, but she knew that she needed to eat. The other girls in the room ate in silence, none of them with any energy after the day they had just had.

When she lay back on the bed of hay, her back ached and longed for rest. There was sighing and deep breathing after the lantern was snuffed out and the door closed. The room descended into pitch black. Sophia listened for any hint of noise, of sounds of her father or her love coming to rescue her, but there was only silence.

Sophia nodded off soon after, her body uncomfortable but screaming out for sleep.

Sophia jerked awake sometime later, and her body stiffened as she realized that someone was standing over her. There was no light in the room save for a small sliver coming from the slightly open door. She sat up in the bed, gaining hope for a moment that it was her father or Baron Vassiley, but that was drained when she realized it

was Walter. She recognized his scent and shape even if she could not see his features.

“Sophia,” he whispered.

“What is it?” asked Sophia.

“I cannot do this anymore; you are right.” She saw his head turn to look toward the door before he turned back to her and continued. “I cannot be the man I am forced to be. My past is my own, and I cannot inflict my own pain on others. I will try to get you out of here, Sophia, but you have to promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” said Sophia.

“You have to come back with the people who can help these girls and me. No one must know that I am the one who did this, and I will throw myself at the mercy of those you bring. Please promise me that you can do this, Sophia.”

“I promise,” she said. “If you help to save me, I will save you, Walter.”



“*Y*our Grace,” said Baron Vassiley, a frown plastered on his face. “I am looking for Maximilian. I have tried my best to watch over the fool, but he has taken it upon himself to roam around my house, no doubt getting into my private affairs, and then he commandeered a coach when I made it quite clear that he was to stay put. I would blame my help, but he apparently invoked your name, and they were at a loss as to what to do.”

Neville watched the man ranting in front of him and wondered if Maximilian had been right that this man was not good enough for his daughter. Neville still did not know much about the Baron, and he was losing his temper rather easily. Neville lost concentration and did not hear some of what the man was saying, but the sentiment was clear.

“Do not worry,” said the Duke. “I will assume him into my care. I am sorry that he was a bother to you, but did you utilize him? I do not believe that he was responsible at all for my daughter’s disappearance, and he only wants to help.”

“No, let me apologize, Your Grace. This is a tough time for you, and I only want to take any burden from your shoulders.”

“Thank you,” said Neville.

“And before you ask, the search is ongoing, and I have recently doubled the number of men at my disposal. I have been trying to maintain my business recently, if only to keep money flowing to fund the search for your daughter.” Baron Vassiley paused for a second and

regarded the Duke. "Pardon me for prying, but I have heard a rumor that this is not the only loss you are going through at the moment. Lady Julia has been cast out from your life. I sense that this is affecting you too."

"That is prying, Baron Vassiley."

"Then pardon me, Your Grace. I only mean to say that you seem a better man when you are with her. I found myself a better man when I was with Sophia and cannot think straight without her."

"What are you trying to say?" asked Neville, becoming more annoyed with the man, though he could not tell if it was because of his distrust of the Baron or the residual anger inside.

"No, nothing," said the Baron. "I only want my future father-in-law to be happy. Perhaps... no."

"Out with it, man," said Neville.

"Only, if being with Lady Julia will be beneficial to you and Sophia, then you should go after her. Tempers can be lost, but good women need not be. If you are to take a trip to her residence, you can bring her back here with you. That will also give you a chance to take Maximilian home. I do not want to tell you what to do, but I believe him to be a hindrance in this matter. He is sneaky and untruthful. I believe that he should be taken home as soon as possible."

"I need to be here for the search," said Neville.

"I have doubled the number of men out there looking for your daughter and my love, Your Grace. I now have more men looking for her than you do. You can entrust me with your people too. A trip to Lady Julia's residence should not take long at all, and you can be back in the city in no time. When your wits are back about you, you can take over control once more."

Neville thought about it for a moment. He did miss Julia, and he knew

that he was the one in the wrong. Not long ago, he would not admit that, but she had changed him. “Perhaps you are right,” he said. “I will not be gone for long, and I can reclaim what I have lost.”

“And I will soon reclaim what I have lost too,” said Baron Vassiley.

\* \* \*

Sophia woke up the next morning with fear and hope both in her heart. She looked around the room to find the others rising and furrowed her brows as she tried to remember whether what had happened during the night had actually happened. She glanced over at the door as Walter walked past, and he smiled at her gently and briefly, confirming that it was all true.

Another of the well-dressed gentlemen passed quickly by the door, rushing off to somewhere else, and another soon followed. Something else was going on outside the small room that they were cooped up in, and, for a moment, Sophia believed that they had come for her.

That hope was soon lost when she heard the muffled conversation from the main area. It was too buoyant. She worried then that they had plans to move them all, that they were about to leave for Scotland. If they were taken now, not only would her father and Baron Vassiley not have time to reach her, but Walter would be unable to help also.

One of the men appeared in the doorway, and all of the women turned to him. Sophia awaited the news.

“Come on, hurry up!” he shouted. “The work is not going to do itself.”

Sophia sighed. She had at least one more day. She never thought that she would be heartened to hear that she had another day slaving away doing laundry while waiting to be shipped off to Scotland for far worse. She clasped her hands together and offered up a prayer. She knew that someone was watching over her and that she would be saved. Julia was probably bringing help as she prayed.

Once she had straightened her clothes, Sophia hurried out of the room with the other girls, stopping briefly as the men appeared with a woman, pushing her through into the room. Sophia's heart stopped as Julia was pushed past and into the room. Sophia wanted to reach out and grab her, but Julia gave the slightest shake of the head, warning Sophia off.

As Sophia walked out to start another day of work, quickly picking it up over the couple of days that she had been in there, she knew that she had to escape with Julia too. The thought that came after hit her like a slap to the face. If Julia was here, she would have been caught by the men after being in the laundry shop. She would not have reached home before being taken. Her father and Baron Vassiley might be out there looking for her, but they had not received word from Julia about where she was.

The morning passed just as the previous one had with loads of laundry to be done. She worked as hard as she was able to under the circumstances, constantly gazing over at the door. It was not long after when Julia came out wearing similar clothes to everyone else. The two men with her cast a glance toward Sophia, large smiles crossing their faces. They knew everything.

Sophia wanted to run to Julia, the woman her father loved, but she dared not defy those who were in charge. She could not help but look over at Julia, no matter how much she tried, but Julia did not once look her way, and Sophia knew that she had ruined that relationship forever. At least Julia looked like she knew what she was doing, and she was getting through the laundry faster than most of the girls there.

Sophia did not know how she was going to live after this. Not only had she gotten herself caught, but she was the reason why Julia was here too. If only she had gone with Baron Vassiley when he had gone into the gambling den. Everything was her fault.

There was no aroma wafting through the place when lunch came. It was the same as last time, some bread with butter and a cup of hot

liquid that vaguely resembled tea. As she walked to the small room where they would take lunch, the butterflies flapped more furiously in her stomach. She took the plate and cup that was thrust into her hand and walked through the doorway.

With her head down, Sophia walked over to Julia, sitting next to the older woman. "I am so sorry," she whispered. "This is all my fault. I should never have—"

Sophia's words were cut short by Julia throwing her arms around her.

"I am sorry," whispered Julia. "I should not have let them follow me. I should have brought help to you, but I was stupid."

"No, do not say that." Sophia wrapped her arms around Julia and held on tight. "Are they coming? Is anyone coming?"

"I do not think so," said Julia.

"Ha! They will like that up in Scotland," came a shout from the door.

Sophia looked up to see one of the men standing in the doorway. He had a leery look on his face, and his eyes moved up and down Sophia's body.

"You might not do too bad, after all," he continued, turning his gaze to Julia. "Those savages will take anything that they can get." He chuckled to himself and left, leaving a view through the door to where Walter was standing. He held Sophia's gaze for a moment before he disappeared too.

"We have to get out of here," whispered Sophia. "They are going to send us up to Scotland, and I dread what they will do to us when we get there. Yet, we cannot just run. I am sure that they will catch us, and if they do not, they will hurt the other girls here. They told me that they know where my father and Baron Vassiley live. I do not want to put any of them in danger."

“Do you believe their threats?” asked Julia.

“I do.”

“I do too,” said Julia. “They followed me and kidnapped me in broad daylight. There is no telling what they might do. But we cannot just stay here and wait.”

“I have someone who can help me,” said Sophia. She looked toward the door again, but he had not returned. She had to put all of her trust in him now.

“Be careful,” said Julia. “Not everyone is out to help you for no reason. Keep your head down and do exactly as they say until we can be sure. But, know this, I will not rest until you are out of here.”

“With you,” said Sophia.

Julia did not respond to that. She took a bite out of the bread, chewing on it wistfully. She looked at Sophia, and Sophia did the same. Lunch would be over soon, and she did not want to go back to work on an empty stomach.

It was a little after lunch, when Sophia’s forehead was dripping with sweat, that Walter sidled closer to her under the guise of watching the woman. When he was almost side by side, he whispered just loud enough for her to hear.

“I am sorry about your friend, but two is complicated. I can get you out, but not her.”

“You promised to help me,” said Sophia.

“Yes, to help *you*,” responded Walter. “I cannot take the risk, especially with them watching the two of you. I will get you out, and when you bring back help, you can get your friend out.”

“Walter,” whispered Sophia, but he was already gone, walking past

the women in the area in front. Sophia did not think that she could leave without taking Julia with her.

“*I* drove her out,” said Neville. The gentle sway of the carriage had replaced the bumpy ride as they had moved from the cobbled streets of London to the packed dirt roads on the outskirts. “I should have paid better attention to her, but I acted immaturely and lashed out. I was not angry at her but at the world. She is the only thing that is keeping me sane through all of this. Do you think that she can be convinced of that, Maximilian?”

Maximilian looked up, a desolate expression on his face. “I honestly do not know,” he replied. “My mother has grieved at length since my father died, and she has not ventured back into the world of relationships until she met you, Your Grace. She may not have immeasurable wealth or status, but she is a proud woman. I wish I had a better answer for you than that.”

“You speak the truth, Maximilian, and I like that about you. You may not be the right man for my daughter, but it is one of the attributes that made me believe that you were.”

“I am sorry that it did not work out.” Maximilian spoke with a dreamlike tone.

“I fear that it might not work out with Baron Vassiley either. What you say about the man feels like the truth to me. I still do not know much about him, and even though he has dedicated himself to the search for my daughter, there is something about him that I do not trust. Be that as it may, your mother and I spoke at length about allowing our children to wed whoever they choose.”



“She said that?” asked Maximilian.

“She only wants you to be happy,” said Neville. “And that is all that I want for my daughter. You do not need to keep your love from her— whoever you are in love with, she will accept your decision. I may have to do the same with Baron Vassiley when Sophia is found. I will not stand in the way of their love if that is who she chooses. My parents would not have been able to stand in the way of my marriage. If Sophia is in love, then so be it.”

“I heard you speaking with Baron Vassiley,” said Maximilian. “Do you really mean to leave me here? I want to help find Sophia.”

The manor loomed in the distance, the leaves on some of the trees around it starting to turn yellow. Neville’s heart caught in his throat as he thought about speaking with Julia again. He turned back to Maximilian, trying to take his mind from it.

“I have no intention of leaving you here,” said Neville. “Once I get Julia... if she will come back with me, I need both of you back at my London residence. I cannot do this alone. You are both a part of my life now, and I know that Sophia would want you to be part of this, Maximilian.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Maximilian. “I will help to find her, I promise you that. I will not let you down again.”

“I know,” said Neville. Maximilian had not let him down—he had told him that. “Let me talk to your mother alone first so that I can apologize to her.”

“I will wait in the coach,” said Maximilian.

The carriage came to a halt, and the footman quickly made his way around to the Duke’s door to open it. Neville stepped out quickly and made his way to the front door of the large house. He did not remember ever being so nervous in his life. He hesitated for a moment, coming to a halt before reaching the door. Since she had left,

he had been fighting his feelings. To admit now that he loved her would make it all the more painful, but there was no denying it. Neville had never thought that he would find love after losing his wife, but he had.

The Duke took a deep breath and walked up to the front door, knocking on it loudly. He straightened the front of his shirt, pushing his hair to the side too. A moment later, the butler answered.

“Your Grace, to what do we owe the honor?” he asked.

“I need to speak with Lady Julia,” said Neville, looking beyond the butler with the hope that he would catch a glimpse of her.

“I am afraid that she is not here,” he said. “I believed that she was with you, Your Grace.”

“She had not returned?”

“We have not heard from her since she departed with you, Your Grace.”

“Oh,” was all that Neville could manage. He stepped away from the door and walked back to the coach in a daze.

“What is going on?” asked Maximilian when Neville got close. “I will speak with her.”

“She is not there,” said Neville. “She has not returned from London. Is there another place where she would go? She left in anger, and that was my fault. Would she go somewhere else first?”

“No,” said Maximilian. The worry in his tone was unmistakable. “No, she would either come to find me or return here. There is nowhere else for her to go. Are you sure that she left?”

“I am sure,” said Neville. He looked wildly around, expecting her to jump out and let him know that it had all been one big joke, but he

was only met with the gentle blowing of the wind through the trees. “What if,” he started before pausing and thinking it through. “What if someone is doing this to me? They might have taken Sophia and then Julia.”

“Who would do such a thing?” asked Maximilian.

“I do not know,” admitted Neville. “We must return to London as quickly as we can and find them. I only hope that Julia is avoiding me because she is angry and not something worse. And Sophia... oh, what a mess. We must make sense of the situation.”

The carriage was quickly turned around, and they headed back for the hubbub of the city. As the coach bumped gently up and down, Neville could not help but think that he was responsible for this—the two women he loved most in the world were missing, and it was all his fault.

\* \* \*

The man stood in the shadows and watched Walter work. For as long as he had known him, he had never liked the man. He did as he was told, but he never did it out of loyalty or appreciation for the work that they did, but out of fear or perhaps a false sense of duty. The other men worked around Walter, none interacting much with him. They disliked him as much as he did.

He remained where he was, watching the women as they worked, paying particular attention to the two newest. He was particularly proud of Sophia. They would like her very much up in Scotland, and he would be paid handsomely for her. Julia had been an unfortunate addition. They had not needed to take another before shipping the goods up to the North, but it would bring in a little more income, even if it had been dangerous to take her.

His men had to do what they had to do, and when they had explained the situation, it was an easy decision to make. There was a lot of confidence in the men who had been chosen for this work, and they

had come through again. He looked at Walter one more time and scowled—he would get rid of him if he could.

Sophia was hard at work, dunking the clothes into the water and then scrubbing them as if she had been born to do this type of work. They would dress her back in her nice clothes before they took her up to Scotland. The better and more proper they looked, the more they were usually paid by the savages up there.

He took one more look at Sophia, a wicked smile crossing his lips, and he moved from the shadows. He wished that he could keep her for himself, but the money was much more important. There were plenty of women in his world. The door was opened for him as he approached it, and he passed through to the front of the laundry shop, a large smile on his face. This would be the best shipment yet.

“How are the preparations?” asked the man in a hushed tone.

“They are going as planned,” said John. He looked over at one of the customers in the shop and back at the man. The man nodded, and the two of them moved off to the side. He did not mind being seen here, but he should not be overheard speaking about his private business.

“You did well taking the old woman,” said the man. “I trust that the other issues are not a distraction?”

“Nothing that we cannot handle,” said John. “They have men out searching for the Duke’s daughter, but there is always someone looking for lost loved ones. We have not been discovered yet, and we will not be found. We have ways to throw them off the scent.”

“Good,” said the man. He moved his hands over the front of his waistcoat, picking a thread from the expensive fabric and flicking it to the floor. He straightened his hat, too, taking great pride in his appearance. One look at the man, and it was obvious that he came from money. In reality, that was not the case, and the wealth that he had built was all down to his hard work and ingenuity. And, perhaps, some dabbling in goods that were not strictly legal. “And Walter?” he

added.

“The boy is doing as he is told,” replied John.

The man only nodded. More customers came in, and John watched as they gave money to the men behind the counter. He was also dressed in expensive clothes. It was essential to make a good first impression in any line of work.

“Something does not feel right, this time,” said the man. “I want the shipment moved up. They are to be taken tomorrow.”

“But we will be short on labor,” said John.

“We will make do,” said the man. “We ship this lot of women, and we hire some cheap workers for a few weeks. I have a bad feeling, and I always trust my gut.”

“What about those at the other end?” asked John.

“I will send word to them. They will not mind if they get the goods a few days early. They can still pay at the agreed time if they wish. If we lose out a little because of this, I will take the hit. You and the other men will be taken care of.”

“Of course,” said John. “I will prepare the goods and have them ready to be shipped.”

“Very good. I want them ready to go in the morning—the quicker the women are out of London, the better. And keep an eye on Walter.”

“I always do,” said John.

The man held out his hand, and John shook it. He trusted John more than he trusted his own family. The man took one more look around the shop before he left. Another payday was coming soon, and then they could start plotting their next opportunity.

The day was warm and welcoming. When the man had first started out in this line of work, he had enjoyed taking the women—placing the hood over their heads, the thrill of the fear running through them, the whimpers under the gag. As he had risen through the ranks, both in the organization and in London society, he had taken a back seat, merely luring those to their doom.

He looked up and recognized the man up ahead. He was a lord of some sort, though he could not place where he knew him from. The approaching lord tipped his hat as he walked by. “Good afternoon, Baron Vassiley,” he said.

Neville barged into his London residence, racing through the halls and rooms. “Julia! Julia!” He called out the name loudly, hoping that she would be there waiting for him, but he was only met with silence. It was the housekeeper who appeared first, a worried look on her face.

“Have you seen her?” asked Neville.

“Lady Julia?” asked the housekeeper. “It is the funniest thing. We found that the sheets were missing from your bed, Your Grace. And someone reported that they saw her leaving the estate with a bundle of laundry. She did not return after that.”

“Why would she take the laundry?” asked Neville.

The housekeeper did not have an answer to that and stood silently in front of the Duke.

“Is she here?” asked Maximilian, following the Duke into the house.

“She took some laundry and left the estate,” said Neville.

“Laundry?” asked Maximilian. “We can go to the launderettes and ask about her there.”

“And then what?” asked Neville, finding frustration again. “What if she never made it there? What if she dropped the laundry off and never returned? What if she picked it up again and left? In every scenario, they are not going to know where she is now.”

"We might get a better idea of what her movements are," suggested Maximilian.

"No, I do not believe that she is out there still. I am sorry to suggest it, Maximilian, but I believe that she has been taken, just like Sophia. Perhaps she got close to finding Sophia and was taken too."

"I do not want to think about it, but I have been thinking the very same thing. It might not be fruitful, Your Grace, but I am feeling desperate. I know a woman who might know something. She works in an establishment that is frequented by some unsavory types, and men seem to want to tell her things. I do not like to admit it, but I have confided in her too. If there is something going on, she might know who is involved."

"This is the woman you love?" asked the Duke.

"She is," replied Maximilian.

"Do you trust her?"

"I do. I trust her with my life, and I love her with all my heart. I do not know if she feels the same, but I will make her my wife if it is the last thing that I do."

"I am willing to try anything," said Neville. "Both Baron Vassiley and I have all of our people out there and they have been able to find no sign of her. If you think that this can help in any way, then we need to take our chance."

"I will make sure that they have not moved the coach from the front," said Maximilian.

"Thank you," said Neville. "Not just for this, but for everything."

Maximilian stood in front of the Duke for a moment before excusing himself. Neville looked back to the housekeeper and asked her to return to work. He turned in the entranceway for a moment, feeling



lost, before he strode back outside to find Maximilian waiting by the coach. He hopped aboard, and they left as quickly as they had come.

“I hope that she can help,” said Maximilian.

“When we find your mother, you should take her to meet with this woman,” said Neville.

“I will, Your Grace,” said Maximilian.

“I believe that we are beyond that now, Maximilian. Your mother is very special, and you have become like family to me. We can dispense with the formalities, and you can call me ‘sir’ instead of ‘Your Grace.’”

“Thank you, sir,” said Maximilian.

There was a lull in the conversation as both men became lost in their thoughts. Neville would do anything now to find Sophia and Julia, and he would tell them just how much he loved them once they were both in his arms again. He would never let them go again. And with his feelings for Julia stronger than ever, he could not help but think of Maximilian as a son. He knew that he would never replace Maximilian’s real father, but he would be there for the young man, whatever that might mean for the future.

The short ride to the small venue did not take very long, but they were now in the shadier part of the city, and Neville felt very overdressed as he stepped out of the carriage. Maximilian followed him out and then led the way through an open door into the small venue which was down the stairs.

Neville had never been in a place like this before. He had heard about them, but he had never been inclined to visit somewhere like this for entertainment. They both walked into the establishment, eyes on them from all corners of the large room. Thankfully, the bar was quiet, and there were only six pairs of eyes tracking them.

“You again?” asked the barman. “She’s not singing tonight.”

Maximilian blushed and looked sickly down at the floor. “Is she here today?” he asked. “I would like to speak with her if at all possible.”

“Many have tried,” said the barman with a smile and a shake of his head. “Wait here.” He walked off into a back room behind the bar.

Neville was feeling more and more uncomfortable in this place. He had every confidence in his own abilities and could broker deals with the most powerful men in the country, but he found that he did not know what to do in this situation. He stood by Maximilian’s side and waited.

There was a fog about the place. Men smoked in the place a lot, and that fog remained permanently in the air. There was a smell that came with it, too—a slightly burnt, smoky smell. The walls were bare stone, not dirty, but not aesthetically pleasing either. Tables and chairs littered the room, most of them in some state of disrepair, and a stage sat at the far end of the room—a piano upon it.

Neville’s head was snapped back to the bar as a woman emerged from the back with the barman. As she did, Maximilian’s face lit up, and he quickly dampened the smile that had appeared on his face, trying his best to keep his cool in the presence of this lady. When she spoke, it came with an Italian accent.

“Max, have you come to hear me sing again? I swear, if I did not know any better, I would think that your intentions were not only that,” said Maria Romano.

“No, no,” stammered Maximilian. “I am seeking your help. My mother has disappeared, and so has the Duke of Edinbran’s daughter.”

“Oh, how awful,” said Maria. Neville could see why he liked her so much. She had some beauty, though not overwhelming by any means, but that was not what made her special. When she spoke, she was empathetic and caring. She sounded genuine and without any secrets. The Duke was sure that what you saw with Maria was what you got.

“How can I be of help?” continued Maria.

“Can we speak in private?” asked Maximilian.

Maria glanced at the barman and nodded. He left three of them to move back behind the bar. Maria led Maximilian and Neville to a table far from the other patrons. They sat in silence for a moment before Maximilian spoke.

“The Duke’s daughter was taken. She has not returned after coming to the city. There are dozens of people out looking for her, but no trace has been found. My mother has disappeared too, and she might be connected to all of this. You have to help us. Do you have any idea where they might be?”

“What makes you think that I would know?” asked Maria, crossing her arms across her chest.

“I do not mean it like that,” said Maximilian quickly. “I know that men talk to you. I have heard them, not that I am listening in on your conversations, but I... I do not know what I mean to say.”

“You love this girl and your mother?” asked Maria.

“I do,” said Maximilian. “Not like that, though. I love my mother more than anything in the world, and I love Sophia too, but only like I would love a sister. We were to be wed at one point, but it did not work out. I only mean to say—”

Neville grabbed Maximilian’s arm. “My daughter is missing, and so is his mother. If there is anything that you can tell us, you could be saving their lives.”

Maria sighed and looked around the room. “I have heard rumors that there is a launderette near the center of the city that is run by unsavory types, but you did not hear that from me.”

“Launderette,” said Neville, quickly lowering his voice. “She took the

laundry from my house.”

“I do not know what they do there, but they put women to work who do not want to work. They do not always pay them, or that is what I have heard.”

“Thank you, Maria,” said Neville. “This helps more than you know. I know that this is the place, Maximilian. We are going to find Sophia and Julia there.”

“I hope that you are right,” said Maximilian. He continued to stare at Maria, unaware of what he was doing. She raised her hand and touched his cheek briefly.

“I hope that you do find her, Max,” she said. “Bring her back here to hear me sing when you do.”

“I will,” said Maximilian with a bright smile on his face.

“What is the address?” asked Neville.

“I do not know for sure, but it is either on or around Oxley Road.”

“Come on, Maximilian,” said Neville, dragging the man to his feet. “Thank you again, Maria.”

She pushed her hair from in front of her face, sticking it behind her ear. Neville pulled on Maximilian’s arm until he had dragged him from the venue. They boarded the coach once more, moving even faster this time. Neville did not want to waste any more time. He had hope now. They had to be there; he had to believe that. If they were not, then the future was not worth thinking about. It had been days with everyone looking for his daughter, and nothing had yet been found.

When they found the launderette, which was bang in the middle of Oxley Road, Neville jumped out of the coach and ran into the shop, Maximilian close on his heels. There were a few customers in the

shop, but that did not stop Neville.

“Sophia!” he shouted, looking wildly around. “Julia! Sophia! Julia!”

The patrons in the shop looked at Neville as if he were crazy.

“Where is she?” shouted Neville at the man behind the desk.

“Excuse me, sir, but please can you keep your voice down. If you only let me know how I can help you, I am sure that I can be of assistance.”

“Where is my daughter?” shouted Neville. “Is she in there?” Neville did not wait for an answer. He barged through the door, finding multiple young women bent over washbasins, vigorously cleaning clothing. “Sophia! Where are you?”

More men had joined Neville in the room, all looking toward him. Neville moved from woman to woman, looking for his daughter, but he could not find her. “You?” he asked one of them. “Are you here against your will? Are they forcing you to be here?”

“No, sir,” said the woman. “They are paying me for my work. I only just started, but they are treating me well.”

“You are not forced to stay here?” Neville asked.

“No, sir,” said the woman. “I have a home and a family.”

Neville looked around the room, but no one came forward. Neville could have questioned them all, but they did not look like women who were being held against their will and forced to work.

“I apologize,” said Neville, turning back to the man who had been behind the desk.

“I would appreciate not being accused of such things,” said the man. “My business is only worth as much as its reputation.”

“Again, accept my apologies. My daughter is missing, and I just thought—”

“I must ask you to leave, sir,” interrupted the man.

“Of course,” said Neville. He felt Maximilian’s hand on his arm, and he was the one led from the building this time. He tried to speak, but he was unable. Instead, he boarded the coach, helped up by Maximilian.

“We will find them,” said Maximilian as he boarded too.

“We will?” he asked.

Maximilian did not have an answer. There was silence once more, and it felt like the roof of the coach was pressing down on Neville’s head. He looked out the window and almost jumped out of his skin a minute later when a face appeared there, a man jumping onto the side of the coach and hanging on. The driver must have spotted him, and the coach stopped quickly.

“I know where she is,” said the man. “You are the Duke, are you not. Please let me in and let us go from this place. I cannot be seen with you.”

Neville nodded, and Maximilian opened the door to let the man in. As soon as he was sat on the opposite side of the coach, Neville instructed the driver to continue on.

“Speak, man,” commanded Neville.

“She said that you would come, but I thought that it was too late for me. It may be too late now that they have taken her. She is on the way to Scotland, but they have only just left. There is still time to catch up with them. Please, you have to help me. I will take you to her—I know the route, but you have to protect me from them.”

“If you lead me to my daughter, you can have anything that you

wish,” said Neville.

Sophia feared for her life as she was led from the launderette and into a coach. She had been bound and gagged once more, but at least she did not have the hood over her head this time. As the man by her side forced her into one of the coaches, she looked around wildly for Julia, but she could not find her. She worried that she would not see her again.

The man placed his hand on her head and forced her forward. She was bundled into the couch with five other women and was bundled into the seat. She stood up as quickly as she could and looked out through the door but could not see Walter either. She had believed him when he had said that he would get her out, but the hope in her heart was disappearing. She did not want to go to Scotland, and she had not even begun to think about what they would do with her when they got there.

A curtain was pulled over the window by the well-dressed man inside the coach, and he also yanked on Sophia's dress, pulling her back into her seat. He pulled out a knife, the blade keen and sharp, placing it near Sophia's throat. The threat was obvious: do not make a sound.

There were five other women in the coach, all with a look of fright upon their faces which Sophia knew she must also be wearing. She could not see the outside world anymore, perhaps her final look at her beautiful homeland—England. She thought briefly about running or trying to fight her way out, but she knew that it would be of no use. She was trapped now like a fly in a web.

They sat there for a few minutes, and Sophia waited for the coach to



start moving. Before it did, there was a commotion outside. There were some grunts, followed by cussing and muted discontent. She almost rose from her seat. Surely her father and the Baron had finally come, and they were taking care of the men outside.

The door to the coach was opened, and she came face to face with one of her kidnappers. He held her gaze for a moment before grabbing one of the other girls and wrenching her from the carriage. A moment later, he thrust Julia into the coach. The older woman smiled through the gag, the look more a grimace than a grin. She sat down beside Sophia and pressed herself close. Sophia was glad that at least her friend was with her.

It was not long after Julia joined her in the coach that the vehicle started moving again. She did not know how many of them there were or how many coaches were taking them, but she had seen at least half a dozen outside the launderette. There were six girls in each, accompanied by three men; one inside and the other two in the cab. The one in theirs had his knife constantly on show.

It felt like hours, but the passing of time was indecipherable. Sophia knew that they had not been traveling more than a day only by the fact that it had not darkened outside. If it were not for the curtain, she might have said that they had been traveling for a week already. They must have stopped well after they had left the city. When Sophia was led from the coach, there was green countryside all around, dotted with the reds, oranges, and browns of autumn. The gag was removed from her mouth.

"I am going to untie your hands," said the man. "If you try to run, I bid you good luck. We will cut you down before you have gone far, and if we do not, the bandits in the area will do a lot worse than what is waiting for you in the North. We are miles from the nearest city. You will find life in the wild is not at all what you expect. We are going to feed you if you act appropriately."

Sophia had no intention of running. She did not want to eat either. All she wanted now was to sit and talk with Julia. She sat herself down

on the green grass, and a chunk of bread was handed to her. There was nothing to accompany it and no water to wash it down. She witnessed Julia being pulled from the coach too. The woman had the gag removed from her mouth, and Sophia could see that she was being given the very same instructions.

“What are you going to do?” asked Julia stubbornly. “You cannot do worse than what they will do in Scotland. Now, give me my bread and allow me to sit with my friend.”

The man looked to one of the others, the obvious leader, and waited for approval. “What does it matter to me?” asked the leader. “If they cause problems, stick them. If they sit quietly, they can continue on. I am sure that they do not want to be torn apart by the wolves out here.”

The man holding Julia let her go and shrugged his shoulders. Julia snatched the bread as she was handed it, and she walked over to Sophia as if she had just negotiated an important business deal. Sophia looked around while Julia approached, but there was still no sign of Walter. She had always imagined her life going in a certain direction, but it had wildly diverged. She would never get to marry the Baron now. She would not get to live her dream life.

“Was that you making the commotion outside the coach?” asked Sophia.

“I did not want to be separated from you,” said Julia. “I could not bear the thought of you being out here alone. Please tell me if I am out of line, but you feel like a daughter to me after everything your father and I have been through. Though, that did not end well, and I will forever regret that.”

“What happened?” asked Sophia.

“It does not matter,” replied Julia. “We were both angry. If I had not stormed out, I would not be here, and I am glad that I am. I do not wish for this to happen to either of us, but I would rather you did not

have to do this alone.”

“I am only able to get through this because I have you by my side,” said Sophia. “I am not strong enough to do this.”

“You are stronger than you believe.” Julia placed a hand on Sophia’s arm. “You have more strength than most.”

“I still believe that we will get back to them,” said Sophia. “Is that naive of me? I believe that my father and Baron Vassiley will come, and we will both be reunited with our loved ones.”

“I do not know if your father loves me still,” said Julia. “And I will not go crawling back to him.”

“I will set that straight,” said Sophia. “I am in no doubt that he loves you. Perhaps he forgot, or his judgment was clouded. I will talk some sense into him. He can be a stubborn man.”

“Yes, he can,” agreed Julia.

Both women took a bite of their bread. It was dry and tasteless—so much so that Sophia had to swallow a few times to get the morsels down.

“Yes, this one,” said one of the men as he approached. There were two others with him, and the three of them held knives in their fists. “She is surely the best of this ragged bunch. What say we have some entertainment as we eat our lunch.”

“Come on,” said one of the men behind, pointing his knife at Sophia. “Get up and show us a little of what you are going to provide when you get up there.” He stepped forward and grabbed Sophia by the arm, yanking her up to her feet.

“Leave me be!” shouted Sophia.

“Feisty, I like that. Dance for us, come on!” He started clapping his

hands together in a slow rhythm, and the others in the clearing where they had stopped followed suit. He took his knife and poked it into Sophia's side—not enough to cut her, but enough to have her jerk back.

“Stop it!” shouted Julia, jumping to her feet. The laughter started immediately but quickly stopped when she batted at the man's hand, knocking the knife from his grip. Before he knew what was happening, Julia had bent down and retrieved the knife, pointing it at the man. The laughter increased in volume.

The man looked around at his comrades and smiled too, finding confidence in numbers. He circled around Julia as she haphazardly slashed with the blade. He was too far from her to be cut by the knife, but that did not stop her from trying, keeping him at a distance. The man suddenly stepped forward, and Julia thrust the weapon. The man dodged, spinning and grabbing Julia's hand. He crushed her hand in his fist, and the knife tumbled to the ground. He quickly retrieved it.

Julia was pushed back, falling to the ground, but Sophia did not dare go to her as another of the men approached. He had a knife raised toward her, and his grip was tight.

“Come on, dance for us,” he said with a smile. “It is the least that you can do after what your old friend did to Jack.” He looked across at Jack and laughed. Jack skulked off with a red face.

“Do not dare touch her!” shouted Julia, rising to her feet again. She moved between Sophia and the man, holding her arms out to make herself as big as possible. The man facing the two of them laughed again. He stepped forward and brought the knife up to Julia's throat.

“Step aside, I do not want to have to hurt you.”

“Do you really think that I am scared of you?” she asked.

“You should be,” he replied. The knife came down to his side, but his other hand came up, striking Julia across the face. She went down

again, and Sophia let out a small welp. The man raised the knife again, but Julia rose once more, holding her face but still putting herself in the way.

“Please, you cannot,” said Sophia. She did not want to see Julia hurt anymore.

“I can do this all day,” said the man. He stepped forward quickly before Julia had a chance to move, and he struck her across the cheek again, sending her to the ground. Sophia gasped this time, but she did not move, frozen to the spot. She wanted to be brave like Julia, but she was not.

Julia was slow getting to her feet, but she did it, using up every ounce of strength to make it. Sophia held onto her, holding her up.

“One more time ought to do it,” said the man. He raised his hand one more time, ready to strike, but he was interrupted by one of the others.

“Get them back in the carriages. It’s time to leave.”

“Lucky you,” said the man with the knife. “You do not get to be in the same carriage, though. You have caused enough trouble.”

Julia was too weak to say anything, and Sophia did not want to take a hit as Julia had. Sophia let herself be taken from Julia, watching as the older woman was taken to another coach this time. Julia was the bravest woman that Sophia had ever met. And now, she was being taken from her.

Sophia boarded the coach again. This time, she was entirely alone.

“*T*hey do not take them by conventional routes,” said Walter, speaking quickly as the coach rumbled down the dirt road. “They do not want to be discovered as they travel, so they stick to the secondary roads, the ones that are not used often, unless by other criminals and bandits. I had a part to play in this, and I cannot express how sorry I am.”

“Lead me to my daughter, and you will be absolved of your crimes,” said the Duke of Edinbran.

“And you are positive that my mother is there too?” asked Maximilian.

“I believe that it must be her,” said Walter. “She spotted Sophia in the washhouse. If she had not gone to your daughter, Your Grace, she might have escaped, but she made too much of a scene. They would have followed her when she left the launderette and taken her soon after. Sophia wanted me to get both of them out of there, but I was unable. I was waiting for an opportunity to get Sophia from there, but they moved up the transport date. I only wanted to help her.”

“She is a very beautiful woman,” said Maximilian, staring at Walter.

Walter held his gaze for a moment before turning red and looking toward the ground. Neville did not know what he thought of this criminal having feelings for his daughter. He could not think of that—all he was focused on was finding his daughter, no matter how he did it.

“She told me that those who came would help me. I believe that she spoke of the two of you. You are both powerful men, are you not?” He looked at Neville with pleading eyes.

“Just take me to my daughter,” said Neville.

“I did not mean to get caught up in this. My brother has always been the successful one in the family, building his fortune after our parents passed. I only wanted to be able to make my own way. I got caught up in gambling debts, and I almost lost our entire fortune. I suppose that this is my punishment for not being sensible with our money. Now, I have to work for these people until my debts are repaid, but I believe that they never will be and that I will be indebted to them forever. Please, ask your daughter. She knows that I am a good man. I only need a second chance. I would have rescued her if I had a little more time. You have to believe me.”

“Will you please be quiet, man. I need some time to think,” said Neville.

“I am sorry, Your Grace. I only want to convey that I am not like the others. I want to save her just as much as you do. She is beautiful, just as Maximilian said. I cannot deny it. I wanted to save your daughter, for she is the one who saved me. I was happy to go along with whatever they asked me to do. My life was over anyway, so what was the use in fighting it. But when I saw her—I do not know if you believe in love at first sight, but it was like a light in a dark room, a flower in bloom, the first rain in spring. I will not keep quiet about it. She is the most wonderful creature I have ever met in my life, and I know that I will never make her mine, but I do not care. My life is better for meeting her.”

Neville sighed and considered this fool in front of him. He was about to order the man to be quiet again, but Walter beat him to it.

“Do not worry, you will not hear another word from me. I only plead that you ride at speed. We are a little behind, but they will rest the ladies a number of times before they reach the border. We will catch

them if we are quick enough.” Walter leaned back into the seat, looking up at the ceiling of the coach.

Neville was glad that the man was finally done speaking. He disliked the man—he was part of the organization that had taken his daughter, but, without him, he would not be coming for Sophia. He had hope again, real hope. He had not said it to Walter, but he did believe in love at first sight. That did not change how he felt about the man, but he could relate to him, and that frustrated him no end. How could he share any thoughts and emotions with this young man before him? Neville shook his head and pushed the thoughts from his mind.

He opened the window on the side of the coach, poking his head out to look before and behind the coach. Before leaving London, he had gathered as many of his men as he could, commandeering multiple coaches and horses. He had also contacted the constabulary, bringing along as many law officials as he could, which turned out to be numerous.

There were two dozen lone riders on horses up front, all instructed to stay with the coaches until they reached the gang who had taken the women—at least twenty if Walter was to be believed. There were more coaches and lone riders behind, and each man riding was armed, ready to fight. Neville had also sent word to Baron Vassiley after being unable to locate any of his men. The message told the Baron that they were in pursuit of Sophia, and he was to follow at the earliest opportunity.

And so, they rode. The countryside outside was a blur, and each passing hour took them closer and closer to the Scottish border. Walter had never ridden with them to deliver the goods, and he had no idea how far over the border they would take them. They would not reach the border for a few days, but the quicker they caught them, the greater the chance that no one would have been harmed on the way. Walter had heard stories of women stepping out of line on the way, only to be taken care of and left on the side of the road for the wild animals.



Neville watched Walter as they rode. He did not think that the man was lying to him, but he had to be careful. If this was part of the ploy, then this young man could be a decoy, taking them on a wild goose chase.

It was only an hour later that a shout came from up front. Soon after, a constable drew up alongside the carriage.

“They have been spotted,” said the constable. “It looks like they are going to try and make a run for it, but they will not be able to outrun us. We will catch them soon. I ask that you stop the carriage and wait for us to return with your daughter.” He glanced at Maximilian. “And your mother.”

“We will do no such thing,” said Neville. “I want to be there the minute she is found. We will not hang back.”

“As you wish,” said the constable. “We do not know how these men are armed, and we need to be careful. It is not a question of us taking them. We will take them dead or alive, I just want to ensure the safety of the women, and I do not want to lose any of my men in the process.”

“I understand,” said Neville. “But, if these cretins do decide to hurt the women, they are to be dealt with accordingly. You are to use as much force as is necessary to bring these men to justice and free the women.”

“I understand,” said the constable. He rode off toward the front, shouting instructions as he went. There was more shouting from those on horseback, and Neville watched as more horsemen rode past with rifles in their hands. Walter watched too, and he looked nervous.

There were gunshots from up ahead, accompanied by the whinnying of horses. Shouts came, followed by another half-dozen gunshots. The coach came to an abrupt halt, and Neville poked his head out to try and get a better look, only for him to be pulled back in by Maximilian.

“Careful, sir. You do not know what is going on out there and you do not want to be hit by a stray bullet. Wait until the constable returns.”

Neville did not reply, but he did not poke his head out again. He fidgeted with his hands on his lap as everything went quiet. He looked from Walter to Maximilian and back to the window. He thought about pushing his head out of the window, but he did not. Less than a minute later, the constable arrived back at the door.

“It is over,” he said.

Neville took a deep breath. “My daughter?”

“I am not sure yet,” said the constable. “They are helping the women out as we speak. The men put up a fight, but none of them were carrying guns, only knives. Two of them were shot and killed, and the rest are being dealt with. None of the women were hurt.”

“I have to go find her,” said Neville, hoping that this was the end.

“I am coming too,” said Maximilian. He looked over at Walter.

“I will stay,” he said. “I worked with these men for more than two years. I cannot show my face to them, or they will know that it was me who brought their end. I do not know how deep the organization runs, but there are more out there. Please let me know the names of the men once they have been detained.”

“If my daughter is there,” said Neville. “If we do not have Sophia and Julia, you are owed nothing.”

Walter nodded.

Neville exited the carriage, and he ran beside the constable on his horse. They had stopped right behind the carriages that they had been chasing, and it was not far to go. There were women up ahead—some crying, others crouched on the ground, or taking sips of water from the constables and the Duke’s men. He scanned their faces, looking for

his daughter, but he could not find her.

He slowed his pace, spinning in a circle to locate her, but she was not there. “No,” he muttered. “No, no, no.”

“Father!”

The shout was a light in the darkness. Neville looked to his right, and there she was. Sophia ran toward him at full speed, and he almost did not have time to open his arms to accept her before she slammed into him. He wrapped her up in his arms, never wanting to let her go. The tears streamed down his cheeks, his emotions running rampant.

“Is it truly you?” he whispered. “Are you really in my arms?”

“I am, Father. I knew that you would come for me. I never lost hope.”

“Did they hurt you? Please tell me that you are untouched.”

“I am fine. I may not have been if it were not for Julia. She kept me going when all was lost.”

Neville held his daughter by the shoulders and looked past her to see Julia wrapped up in Maximilian’s arms. He knew then that he had to apologize to her. He loved her, and he needed to tell her that before she left his life for good. First, he pulled his daughter back in.

“I was so worried,” he said. “I am so happy to have you back. I never gave up hope either, but I was starting to think that I was never going to see you again. I am never going to let you go again. No, that is not fair of me. I am going to let you live your life, and I am going to support you as you do. This was all my fault, Sophia.”

“No, it was not, Father. I left and went to the city without telling you. I was the one in the wrong.”

“Perhaps we can both be at fault,” he said. “But when it comes to love, it is me who is at fault.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sophia, emerging from the embrace. She looked behind her to where her father was staring—directly at Julia. She smiled. “You need to go and get her before it is too late.”

“I know,” he said. The two of them walked arm in arm to where Julia was. Neville caught her eye as he walked, and he felt the nerves bubbling up. It was not easy for him to apologize and admit that he was wrong. Something to his left caught his eye—a distraction. Maximilian was engrossed in one of the coaches. He moved from that one to another, tracing the letters on the side with his fingers.

Neville let go of his daughter’s arm and took a deep breath. He was about to go to the woman he loved and beg for her forgiveness, but Maximilian was muttering now, and Neville could not figure out what was going on.

“E&G Shipping,” Maximilian muttered. “I have seen that before.”

Neville shook his head and looked back at Julia. He could not be sure if the woman had a smile on her face or a grimace. He looked into her eyes and hoped that she could read his mind. Another interruption came—another rider. The horse skidded to a stop, and Sophia gasped.

“Baron Vassiley!” she shouted.

Neville turned around to see the Baron, glad that he had finally caught up, even if it was far too late. He wanted to berate the man, but he would not do it in front of his daughter.

“The letter,” muttered Maximilian.

The Baron dismounted from his horse, looking more elegant than ever before as if he had not ridden hours from London to catch up with them. Neville expected more riders to arrive, but none came. It would seem that the Baron had come alone.

He started walking toward Sophia, and she toward him. It all happened so quickly that no one was able to do anything about it.

When they were only five yards from each other, Maximilian stepped between them and punched the Baron, sending him to the ground, blood quickly running from his nose.

Baron Vassiley lay on the ground for a few moments before rising to his feet. Everything that he did was measured and deliberate, and even when rising from the dusty ground with blood coming from his nose, he looked every inch the gentleman.

The Baron dusted himself down, looking at a stunned Maximilian the entire time. He reached into his pocket to fish out a handkerchief which he used to wipe the blood that was trickling from his nose. When he had cleaned himself up, he finally spoke.

"You are going to pay for that dearly," said Baron Vassiley. He turned to the Duke of Edinbran. "I told you that you should not have trusted this man. He has turned quite mad. I ask that he be taken into custody with these other cretins, or I will be forced to deal with him myself. Sophia, come to me, please. How I have missed you."

"Do not take another step," said Maximilian, his voice burning with anger and reproach. It is all falling into place now. *He* was the reason you were taken in London. I hate to be the one to tell you this, Sophia, but I do not believe that this man loves you at all. I believe that he tricked you into coming into the city, and this is the result."

"I have had enough of you!" shouted Baron Vassiley. "I will deal with you myself." The Baron reached to his waist, hinting that there was a gun there.

"Will you explain!" shouted Neville.

"Your Grace?" asked Baron Vassiley. "Do you mean to give this man

the time of day?”

“Baron Vassiley, you may not trust this young man, but I do. He has been nothing but helpful to me, and I would like to hear what he has to say.”

Baron Vassiley did not reply, merely glaring at Maximilian, his hand slipping closer to his waist.

“I knew that I had seen the company name before,” said Maximilian. “E&G shipping. When I was in the Baron’s house, I found the letters that he had been writing. I must admit that I was snooping around because I have never trusted the Baron, but I am glad that I did. E&G shipping is one of the Baron’s companies. They deal with shipping goods to Scotland, or that is what the letter mentioned. They are involved in the slave trade, or whatever this is. The Baron is the man behind this, and he lured Sophia to the city to kidnap her. It is so clear to me now.”

“I cannot believe this,” said the Baron. “E&G shipping? Yes, that might be one of my companies, but one of many. I cannot keep track of them all. Do you really believe that I need to resort to crime to build my fortune? I have enough money to buy you a hundred times over, Maximilian. You have no idea what you are talking about. You have been nothing but a hindrance in our efforts to find Sophia.”

Baron Vassiley smiled, and his face softened. “Sophia, I am only glad that you are safe, my love. We can spend the rest of our lives together now. Please, come to me.”

Sophia looked from Baron Vassiley to her father to Maximilian. She hesitated for a moment before she started moving forward toward her love, though there was a look of confusion on her face.

“Your men!” shouted Maximilian.

“Oh, what now!” shouted Baron Vassiley.

“We could not find them. The entire time that I was at your home, I did not see you speaking with any of your men when the search for Sophia was ongoing. The entire time, I met with many of the Duke’s men but none of yours. When we left the city to come after this caravan, we looked for someone to alert, some of your people to bring with us, but there were none. You had no one looking, did you? It was all a lie. There were no men looking because they are all here, aren’t they?”

“You are ridiculous,” said the Baron. “I suppose that it is your word against mine. We can travel back to the city and talk to my men if you want to push that, and they will tell you that they have been looking for Sophia for days. Speak with these men here. Do you believe that they are my men? That these criminals listen to me? I assure you that none of them will confirm that.”

The Baron looked down at the ground and took a deep breath.

“We are all frustrated,” he continued. “I love your daughter, Your Grace. I love her with all my heart and mean to marry her as soon as we get back to the city. We will find my men in the city. I am sure that they were too busy with the search to be found loitering around like young Maximilian here. I do not like to do this, but it would seem to be Maximilian’s word against mine, and he really does have nothing other than the name of a shipping company.”

“Not only his word.”

Neville turned around to find Walter standing there. He looked as pale as a ghost, and he held one hand in the other, trying to stop it from shaking. He was lost for words momentarily after this opening statement.

“Walter,” said Sophia, moving slightly to go toward him but catching herself. The look on Baron Vassiley’s face could have killed. As Neville looked between the two, the Baron and Walter, it became clear as day—the features were so similar.



“My little brother,” said Baron Vassiley. “My own flesh and blood. The only family that I have in the world. What do you have to say for yourself, Walter?”

There was silence again, and everyone looked from Baron Vassiley to Walter. The tension in the air was palpable, and Neville wanted to say something to break it, but he did not dare. He had to let this play out. Sophia stood a little ways away, no one beside her, caught between the Baron and his younger brother as if this was the choice in all matters that evening. It was black and white, a binary choice between good and evil. Yet, it was never that clear. There are always shades of gray.

“What do you have to say, Walter?” asked Baron Vassiley, glaring at his brother, his hand now on his waist, but no sign of a gun.

“I,” started Walter. He took a deep breath and looked at Sophia before his eyes went back to his brother. “I cannot do this anymore, Harold. I cannot be in your shadow any longer, hiding behind you and being scared of you constantly. My debt should have been repaid by now.”

“Be very careful what you say next, Brother,” said Baron Vassiley. “You know not of what you speak.”

“I know all too well,” said Walter. “Everything that Maximilian has said is true. I can deny it no longer, for I am complicit in everything. My brother is the head of this operation. He is the one behind all of this, and I have proof of it.”

“What is going on, Walter?” asked Sophia. “Baron Vassiley is not like that. He has been out there looking for me.”

“I did not know,” said Walter. “When you mentioned someone looking for you, I did not think that it was my own brother. He has been playing you all along. I would wager that he met you in the city and mysteriously disappeared, leaving you on your own before you were taken.”

“That is what happened, but he would not—”

“He is the one I owe the debt to. I lost all of our money when our parents passed, and I have been trying my best to make it back. I have been working for him ever since he started his empire. He does not care about you, Sophia. He was using you all along. He is charming and rich, but he does not love anyone except himself. I am sorry that this has happened to you. I do care about you, Sophia, but I wish we had not met like this.”

“You cannot be brothers,” whispered Sophia.

“Mother and Father died because of you,” snarled Baron Vassiley. “They were so ashamed that they killed themselves. I should have ended your life after they ended theirs. I gave you a second chance, but you blew it. You could have had all that I did, Walter.”

“I do not want that,” shouted Walter.

“And now, you will have none of it.” Baron Vassiley finally drew his gun, pointing it at his brother. Walter jerked back instinctively before standing up straight again.

“Do as you wish,” said Walter. “I deserve it. You can kill me, but you will rot in prison for the rest of your life.”

“I do not believe that to be true,” said Baron Vassiley. “I have people all over. They will have me out before you can blink. Money goes a long way in this city.”

“I will make sure that you never leave your prison,” said Neville. “I will use all my money to ensure that.”

“Neville,” said Baron Vassiley, waving his gun between the Duke and the constables gathering around. They were all ready to reach for their pistols but did not dare for fear of being shot. “So, how to cause the most mischief before I accept my sentence. Do you really love her, Walter? The Duke certainly does, and Maximilian does in his own

way. Julia too. Yes, she should be the one to die.” He whirled the gun around to point it at Sophia.

The gunshot rang out, followed by six more.

Neville ran to his daughter. She stood frozen, shocked at what had just happened. Below her lay Walter, blood appearing on the front of his shirt. Ten yards away lay Harold with blood stinging his shirt too.

“Are you harmed?” asked Neville, grabbing his daughter.

“I am fine, Father. He shot at me, and I would have been hit if it were not for Walter. He got between me and the bullet. Oh my goodness. Is he dead?”

“I do not think so,” said Neville.

Walter stared up at the blue sky above, his eyes wide and glassy. The slow rise and fall of his chest showed that he was still breathing. It was as if he could not hear a word that was being said.

“Get up, man,” said Neville, crouching down to take his hand. “You can stand?”

“Yes,” whispered Walter. “It caught me in my shoulder. I am fine.”

“Get up so that I can thank you properly,” said Neville.

“You should not be thanking me,” said Walter. “I am the cause of this, not the solution.”

“Nonsense,” said Neville. “If it were not for you, my daughter would be lost... or worse. People can change, I firmly believe that. You may

still have to face your consequences, but you are nothing like your brother.”

Walter allowed himself to be pulled up to his feet. He took another breath and looked over at his brother, who was still on the ground, unmoving.

“I am sorry,” said Neville. “It should not have ended like this.”

Harold Vassiley had managed to get off one shot before the constables had been able to pull their guns and put him down. There was no doubt that the Baron was dead, if he was, in fact, an actual Baron.

“It is exactly how it was meant to end,” said Walter. “He would not have stopped. This was the only way. He was the only family that I had, and he is gone. Everyone who gets close to me finds death.”

“Not everyone,” said Neville. “My daughter is alive because of you, and I am eternally thankful for that. You have proved your worth.”

“It is time for me to go with the constables, is it not?”

“It is,” said Neville. “They will take you back to the city, and you will receive medical help there. I do not know what will come next for you, but I will do all that I can to ensure that they are lenient. You have made mistakes, but you have redeemed yourself also.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” said Walter.

Neville nodded to the constable as he approached. The constable took Walter by the hand, and he did not put up a fight. The constable took his arm and led him away.

“Wait!” shouted Sophia. She ran to Walter and wrapped her arms around him. He winced slightly as she held him tight, but he reciprocated quickly.

“I did not get a chance to thank you,” said Sophia. “You told me that

you were going to save me when I was in the wash house, and you made good on your promise out here. You saved my life, Walter. If you had not come, I would be dead. I cannot thank you enough for what you have done.” She pulled away and placed a kiss on his cheek, doing away with any social conventions.

Walter smiled as he was led away from them, constantly glancing back at Sophia as he was led away. Neville could not help but feel that Walter was now a free man even though he would be taken to prison. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and the man looked as if he would float to the heavens above if he were not being held by the constable.

As soon as they were out of view, Sophia wrapped her arms around her father. “I knew that you would come,” she said. “I knew that you would, I just knew it.”

“I am sorry about the Baron,” said Neville. “No one could have known. It was only Maximilian who suspected him of being someone else.”

“It is better to know now,” said Sophia. “I will be fine, do not worry.”

“You are allowed to grieve, Sophia. You must not bottle this down. I know that you loved the man, whether he was who he said he was or not. You were in love, and that love is now dead. Do not lose that. Mourn it. Grieve it. Keep it in your heart and allow it to pass. If you want to love again after that, then you should. But know that I will be with you every step of the way.”

“Thank you, Father,” said Sophia. “I will be fine because I have you by my side. And Maximilian. And, hopefully, Julia too. I would not have survived the past few days if it were not for her. Now that we are out of there, I want to make good on what we spoke about when we were together.” Sophia took her father by the shoulders with a smile. “You have to go to her, Father. You spoke about second chances with Walter. You have a second chance with Julia—a second chance at love. If that is what you want.”

"It is," said Neville. "I love her."

"Then you need to tell her that," said Sophia. "You need to make this right."

"I know," said Neville. "Wish me luck."

"I will not because you do not need it," said Sophia.

Neville smiled at his daughter and hugged her once more. He walked over to where Maximilian and Julia were talking. He waited for them to notice him before he spoke.

"May I speak to your mother for a moment?" asked Neville.

"Of course," said Maximilian. "I must talk with Sophia and make sure that she is fine."

"I must apologize to you," said Neville when Maximilian had left.

Julia stood shocked for a moment. "Well, I did not expect that," she said. "After how we left it last time, I did not think that you would ever want to speak to me again."

"I am so sorry for how I spoke to you, Julia. I cannot control my anger sometimes, and I took it out on you when you were not the one to blame. I messed everything up. If it were not for me, I would not have driven you away, and you would not have ended up here. I would understand if you never wanted to speak to me again."

"You only drove me into finding Sophia. It was my fault that I could not help her. I made a scene, and then I allowed myself to be taken too. It worked out, though. I am glad that I was taken. They were horrible men, and I am relieved that I was there to help protect your daughter. You cannot blame yourself for what happened. You can blame yourself for how you acted, but not for how everything ended."

"No, it is my fault," said Neville, raising his voice. "I am to blame, and

you should be angry at me. I drove you away, and I did not believe Maximilian, and I did not see through the Baron's facade, and I did not trust my own daughter to make her own decisions. I have failed as a father and as a man." His voice raised in volume even more. "What would you have me do? What would anyone have me do? I have lost my chance at love and happiness."

"Oh, you stubborn, stubborn man," shouted Julia. "Do you really believe that this is all about you?"

The words triggered a memory, and Neville was instantly transported back.

\* \* \*

"Do you really think that this is all about you, Neville? You really are a stubborn man," said Gloria.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked Neville. "How is that stubborn? Does it not show you that I love you too much to ever think about it? I am not the stubborn one, you are!"

"You say that to a pregnant woman?" asked Gloria with mock shock. She placed her hand across her breast. "Do you not know that we are filled with emotion and could snap at any second. I swear that pregnancy in a woman drives her almost to lunacy."

"It does not matter if you are pregnant or not," said Neville. "I have said it, and I mean it."

"Well, it is unlikely to happen, but I do believe that you are being foolish. Look at your face, my love. You are flushed with emotion. Come on over here and comfort our child and me." She ran her hands over her large belly.

Neville obliged, going to his wife and wrapping his arms around her, cradling her and the baby inside. They had picked out names. Arthur for a boy and Sophia for a girl. He did not care which they had. As he



cradled his wife in his arms, he knew that this was for his benefit and not hers. He was the one who needed to be calmed, but he felt so on edge now that he was about to be a father.

He hugged her even tighter, loving no creature more in the world than his wife. He knew that he would also love his child more than anything in the world too, but he could not imagine his life with anyone else, and the thought of marrying someone else was almost offensive to him.

"I am never going to be away from you, so it does not matter," whispered Neville.

"My love, this is not an argument that you can win. You do not need to argue with me about this. I only want you to be happy should anything ever happen to me."

"If anything happens to you, my life will not be worth living anymore. I cannot think of anything worse than being with someone else when you are not with me anymore."

"You will not feel like that if it happens. I am not saying not to grieve for me, but... oh, look at me talking as if I am ill or something. Believe me, I have no intention of ever leaving you, Neville. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I intend to make that happen. We are going to be a family together. Just know, though, that if you ever should pass, I will remarry, and it will likely be a king or some other noble much more important than a duke." He could not see the cheeky smile on her face, but he knew that it was there.

"And now you play with my heart! It is as if an arrow has been shot through my chest."

"I tease you, my love. I do not want to think about it either, but know that if either of us should be taken from this world, we should marry again if we find love. I find that a reasonable conclusion to this conversation. Do you not think that wise?"

“I believe it wise to not argue with my wife anymore.”

“That does sound wise,” replied Gloria.

Neville wrapped his arms tighter around his wife and kissed her on the neck. There was a kick under his hands. This new child was due to make an appearance very soon, and Neville could not wait for that.

Gloria leaned back and whispered into Neville’s ear. “Do not argue anymore, my love. This is all that I will say about the matter—I order you to remarry if you find love after me. Do it for this child inside and for yourself, Neville. We all deserve happiness in life.

\* \* \*

Neville wiped the tear from his eye. It was not long after that Sophia appeared in the world, and Gloria departed. He looked behind him to where Sophia was chatting with Maximilian. He loved her more than anything in the world, and he still loved his deceased wife, but he loved Julia too—he loved her so much that his heart ached.

“I am stubborn,” he said. “You are right, I am a stubborn, stubborn man. I have only been thinking of myself, but not thinking of myself also. I have a chance at happiness, but I keep pushing it away. I thought that I was desecrating her memory by even thinking about it, but she was the one who told me to move on before she passed, almost as if she knew that it was coming. I cannot ignore her words and continue to tell myself that I am respecting my memory.”

“What are you talking about, Neville?” asked Julia. She stood there silent as he spoke.

Neville took a step forward and took Julia’s hand. “I am sorry for everything that I have said and done, Julia. I never thought that I would ever do this again, and certainly not within a scene like this.” Neville took a deep breath. “Julia, will you marry me?”

“Neville, are you quite serious?” asked Julia. “I do not know what to say.”

“I have never been more serious in my life,” said Neville. “I will not tell you what to say, but I hope with all my heart that you accept my proposal. If you do, I will make it my duty to make you the happiest woman in the world.”

“Oh, Neville. How can I say anything else? Of course, I say yes! I love you, Neville, and I have loved you for a long time. I want nothing more than to be with you.”

“You will marry me?” he asked, a smile crossing his face.

“Yes, I will,” said Julia, smiling back. He scooped her up in his arms, twirling around with her.

“Then you have made me the happiest man in the world,” said Neville. He stopped spinning and placed her back on the ground. He could not help himself and leaned forward to kiss her. This time it was different. Before, he had always had his wife in the back of his mind, but he had let her go—he had freed himself. He would always love her, but he loved Julia too.

They pressed their lips against each other, moving in gentle rhythms. Neville wrapped his arms around her again, holding onto her back, and he felt her hands in his hair, pulling his head into her. He closed his eyes, and the world slipped away. It was only the two of them, embraced and lips locked, not another care in the world. Neville

would have held the kiss forever, but he had to stop to breathe. It was not only the kiss, but the woman—she took his breath away.

“I love you, Julia. I love you with all of my heart.”

“And I love you too, even if you are a stubborn, stubborn man.”

Neville laughed at the sentiment. He was stubborn, and that could be both a good and a bad thing. He looked around the clearing where they had stopped, and he laughed again. It made for a ridiculous sight.

The sun may have been high in the sky, and the leaves were a glorious burnt umber, the birds chirping in the trees and the animals making noises amongst the bushes and undergrowth, but it held death and deception too. The dead body of Harold Vassiley lay in the spot where he had been felled, and the other men were still being cuffed and interrogated. If there was a place to ask a woman to marry you, this was not it.

His thoughts were cut short by a jubilant Sophia and Maximilian. There were hugs between the four of them, each taking another in their arms and celebrating this new family that had been created. Neville was not only gaining a wife, but a son too, and he knew that Julia already treated Sophia like a daughter. It was a perfect match.

“What will happen to the women?” asked Sophia.

“I do not know,” said Neville. “They will be returned to their homes or families if they have any. If not, then I do not know what will happen to them.”

“We must help them, Father. We cannot send them back out there after what has happened. And there must be others like them. I want to help them, Father. I feel as if I were put in this position to see it better. This is my purpose in life—to help people who have gone through trauma like this. And, I will entertain matches at your discretion, too, Father.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” said Neville. “I have tried to meddle in your life when I should not have. You can do as you wish, Sophia. If you want an education, I will help provide for that. If you want to help people, you shall have the funds to do so.”

“I want to be a part of it too,” said Julia. “I want to protect them all.”

“And with you protecting them, I believe they will be quite safe,” said Sophia. “I still cannot believe that you disarmed the man with the knife.”

“You disarmed a man with a knife?” asked Neville with a smirk on his face.

“I did indeed,” said Julia. “So, the men in my life better be careful what they say and do.”

“You need say no more,” said Neville, taking a step back. That elicited a chuckle from the other three. “On a serious note,” continued Neville. “I do mean it. You are free to do what you want to do, and that goes for you too, Maximilian.”

“It does,” said Julia. “You are free to do as you please and love who you wish. I hope that you know that.”

“I do,” said Maximilian. “On that note, I believe that we should ride for the city. I have a pressing matter that I must attend to.”

\* \* \*

Maximilian felt the nerves in his chest. He could hardly breathe as he walked down the street toward his destiny. He had bought a new suit, especially for the occasion, buying one as soon as they got back to London. They had been invited to stay at the Duke’s London residence for a few more days until everything was sorted out. He was glad for that—it gave him the chance to do what he needed to do without having to come far.

He had never felt more confident in his life. The suit, combined with finding Sophia, and the proposal from the Duke to his mother had all combined to convince him that this was the right thing to do. She had helped too, after all, and he needed to let her know. But that was not the real reason for his visit this evening. It was a Friday night, and the place would be packed with people, but he did not care.

There was a man stationed at the top of the stairs, and he nodded at Maximilian as he approached. Maximilian greeted the man and walked past him, descending the stairs. The man on the door raised his eyebrows and gave a smile when he saw the flowers that Maximilian was carrying. As he descended, the sweet melodic sounds traveled up the stairs to him.

He fell in love with her all over again just hearing her voice. She was a songbird, an angel, a breeze in the trees. He followed the sound, drawn from the back of the room to the front where there just happened to be an empty chair—a sign that this was exactly where he was meant to be. He sat down in the chair and looked up at her. When Maria noticed him, she smiled as she sang.

The piano played to accompany her, and there was no other noise in the place, except for the occasional muted clink as a glass knocked against another or was placed on the table. No one wanted to hear anything else except for this woman's songs. The song that she was singing finished, and there was wild clapping and whooping from around the room. Maria thanked them all before she launched into her next song—each one in Italian, but that did not seem to bother any of the patrons. They may not have understood the words, but they could feel the emotion behind each song—the pain, joy, agony, ecstasy.

Maximilian could not keep his eyes from her, and he became more and more sure that he was doing the right thing as he waited for her to finish. She sang six more songs as Maximilian sat. When the final one came, the one she always ended with, the applause was rapturous, and everyone stood to admire this Italian woman. She looked across at Maximilian again and smiled.

There were many who wanted her attention, and she made sure to speak with them all. But, slowly, she worked her way toward Maximilian. He would have waited forever for her, though he could also feel the nerves growing stronger and stronger within him. His body wanted to run, and his head was telling him that this was a bad idea, but his heart was in staunch opposition to both.

“Max,” she said when she finally got to him. “I am glad to see you again. Please tell me that you found your mother and friend.”

“We did,” he said with a triumphant smile. “And it was all thanks to you, Maria.”

“That is wonderful,” she said, throwing her arms around him. Maximilian did not move, his heart beating faster and faster. When she let him go, he wanted to kiss her there and then, but he held back. “Well, why did you not bring her here to see me, Max?” asked Maria with a pout.

“I had to come by myself first,” said Maximilian. “I had to talk to you about something.”

“Oh, that sounds interesting. What would you like to speak to me about, Max.”

“You sang beautifully tonight,” he said. “I mean, you always sing beautifully, but I do believe that you are becoming more and more beautiful. Your voice, I mean. Not that you are not beautiful too. You are very beautiful, Maria. Here, these are for you.” He shoved the flowers quickly into her hands.

“For the singing?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I mean, no. They are for the help you gave. They are a gesture of appreciation for helping to find my mother. Oh, I should have brought two bouquets—one for your help and one for your singing.”

“They are beautiful,” said Maria, sticking her nose into them and taking a deep breath. There was no more music since Maria had stopped singing, but someone else would be on the stage soon. It was quiet, and everyone had their eyes on Maria; there were more than a few smiles on faces as they watched this man bumbling through his words.

“I came here tonight to tell you something, Maria.”

“Oh, you have more,” said Maria with a smile. Each time that she smiled, it melted Maximilian’s heart. He wanted to be with her, and this was his moment to make that happen.

“I like to think that we have gotten to know each other pretty well in the time that I have been visiting you. I do not claim to be more special than any of the others who speak to you, but I feel that there is more between us, Maria. I do not know how to explain this, but I have to tell you exactly how I feel.”

Maria stood in front of him, and he could not decipher the look on her face. He could feel the eyes of everyone else on him, but he could not see them. His vision was a tunnel now with Maria at the end.

“I,” he started. Inside, he was in turmoil. He had come here to tell this beautiful woman that he loved her, and if he did not do it now, he might never do it. He thought back to the Duke, only a few hours previous. He had overcome his inner turmoil to tell his mother exactly how he felt. I love you. That was all that he needed to say. Just three little words, but they were more frightening than anything else he had ever experienced.

“Maria,” he said, thinking about the look on his mother’s face when the Duke had declared his love for her. The entire room was shrouded in silence. “Maria. Will you marry me?”

Bursts of laughter rung out around the room, and Maximilian’s eyes opened wide. He wanted to sink into the ground, and he could already feel his face turning bright red. He could not believe what he had said,



and he opened his mouth to take the words back immediately.

“Yes,” replied Maria, silencing the room.

\* \* \*

Sophia walked down the stone steps that she had walked down dozens of times before. She had still not gotten used to the smell down there, but she continued to go every week to visit him.

“Are you sure that you want to hang out down there?” asked the guard. He looked her up and down. “It is full of unsavory types, not your type of crowd, Miss... Walter tells me that you have been coming to see him every week.”

“And I will continue to come,” said Sophia. “The man saved my life.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that too. Each to their own, I suppose.”

She was led past the cells where the incarcerated were kept. They had grunted at her or rattled the bars the first few times she had passed, laughing when she became scared, but she had become used to that even if she could not stand the smell. They did not try to frighten her anymore. When they got to Walter’s cell, the guard placed the chair that he was carrying.

“You know your way out,” he said.

Sophia nodded and sat down.

“Do not get too close,” said the guard as he walked away. “You cannot trust anyone in here.”

“Sophia,” said Walter, his eyes lighting up. He stood up from the bed and walked over to the bars, holding onto them as he stared through. His smile quickly disappeared. “How I wish that you would not come here to visit me, Sophia. You are wasting your life on me.”

“I am doing no such thing,” said Sophia. And I wish that you would not tell me what to do. If I want to come and visit you, then I will, and no one is going to stop me. You saved my life, Walter.”

“Yes, and you saved mine. If it were not for you, I would not have been brave enough to do what I did. But I am still in here for another year. You should forget about me.”

“I will not, so please stop saying that. You would have been in here for a lot longer if you had not done what you did. You are a changed man, Walter. I knew it from the first time I met you. You might even have been put to death. I hear that some have been.”

“I must thank your father again,” said Walter. “He is the reason for that. When I get out, perhaps he will allow me to visit.”

“He will allow more than that, Walter. I have created a shelter for women who have come from bad situations, and I find myself only wanting to help more and more people. I want to help you too, Walter. When you get out of here, I will take you home with me. My father is prepared to offer you a job. It is the least that he can do after you saved my life.”

“I cannot,” whispered Walter. He walked away from the bars and stood facing the small barred opening on the other side of the room, looking out at the blue sky beyond.

“Walter, please talk to me. I have come to visit you over and over and I will continue to do so, but you have become so distant, almost as if you hate me. I will not tolerate it any longer. Tell me the truth. Tell me why you feel this way, and I will promise not to come and visit you again if I cause you so much sorrow.”

“You do not get it,” said Walter, turning to face her. He put his head in his hands, shaking it wildly. “You do cause me sorrow, it is true.” He flopped down onto the bed, sitting with his elbows on his knees, his head still in his hands. “But it is not because I hate you, Sophia. It is because I love you. I fell in love with you the very first moment I

saw you, and that is when I truly changed. I have so much sorrow in my heart because I know that I cannot be with you. Each time you visit, I am reminded of that. You are the daughter of a Duke, and I am a criminal. I have no money, no power, no family, nothing. I am a lost soul wandering this world, and I do not deserve love, especially not with you. That is why you should leave me and never return.”

“And who are you to tell me who I should or should not love?” asked Sophia.

“What are you saying?” asked Walter, rising to his feet, tears in his eyes. He walked back over to the bars, gripping onto them tighter this time.

“Why do you think that I have been coming to visit you all this time?” asked Sophia. “It was not for you, it was for me. You are the first man who has been nothing but honest with me. You are a real man with feelings and thoughts of his own, not bound or constricted by society.” Sophia rose from her chair and stepped close to the cell. She placed her hands over Walter’s. “It does not hurt that you are also the man who saved my life. You brought my father to me, you exposed the Baron, and you took a bullet. I do not believe that anyone is more suited to protect me than you are.”

“You are not lying, are you? I see the honesty in your eyes.”

“I am not lying,” said Sophia. “I love you too. We are separated by time, but what does that matter when we have our lives to spend together?”

## Epilogue

Julia had insisted that she did not need a new dress for the wedding, but Neville had not taken no for an answer. As she looked in the mirror on the morning she was to be wed, she did not think that she had looked more beautiful in her entire life. She was glad that Neville had been so stubborn in this instance.

The mirror reflected back her image—the white dress hanging down to her ankles, fabric flowers sewn into the hem of the dress. There was also a strip of silk sewn into the hem, draping down below the flowers to better show them off, and she would remove that after to make the dress more functional, one that she could wear to balls with the Duke.

“Oh, I hope that they will not call me duchess,” said Julia. “I do not feel like a duchess. Why would I be different just because I am now married to your father?”

“I believe that they will,” said Sophia with a smile. She put the finishing touches to the flowers that were pinned in Julia’s hair. “And that is that. You are ready for the wedding, *my Duchess*.”

“Oh, please, Sophia,” said Julia with a giggle.

“I promise not to call you duchess,” said Sophia. “Mother is a much more appropriate title.”

“I like that,” said Julia. She hugged her soon-to-be daughter-in-law, loving her as if she were her daughter by birth.

“Let us not be late,” said Sophia. “Our carriage awaits.”

They both descended the steps inside Castle Edinbran, finding the coach outside. It was ready and waiting. They boarded and quickly set off. It was not far to the church, perhaps a fifteen-minute ride. Julia looked out of the window, and her eyes lit up.

“Would you look at that,” she said. “Is it not one of the most beautiful things that you have ever seen?”

Sophia poked her head out of the other side of the carriage to see the sight up ahead. She could see the same view as Julia could. On the road ahead (and behind), there were flowers and herbs laid on the dirt. Julia knew that Neville was responsible for this, and she could not help but smile more than she already was. This was to be one of the happiest days of her life, and it was more perfect than she ever could have imagined.

When they arrived at the small church, the two most important men in the world were waiting for them. Maximilian was there to give her away in her late father’s absence. Neville was there, of course, looking more resplendent than ever before.

He wore a white muslin short with a matching cravat. The black jacket was perfectly tailored, cut away to show off his muscular body and waistcoat. The waistcoat was almost emerald in color, embroidered with rich purple thread. His breeches were dark brown and as tight as possible, showing his muscular legs. Julia licked her lips as she saw his trousers. The ensemble was finished with black socks, pumps, and a top hat. He was the most handsome man that she had ever seen in her life.

The carriage door was opened, and Neville helped her down. He kissed her tenderly on the lips. Sophia exited the carriage too, and Neville embraced her, a look of great pride in his eyes. “I do not believe that I have seen two more beautiful women,” he said.

“I must agree,” said Maximilian. “Mother, it is my absolute pleasure to give you away today.”

“Thank you, Maximilian,” said Julia. “I do not know why, but I feel nervous. What have I got to be nervous about at my age?” She laughed.

“Nothing,” said Neville. “I am quite ready to make you my wife and live with you for the rest of my days. I cannot think of anything better.”

“Then let us proceed,” said Sophia. “A love like this need not be delayed one more minute.”

Neville could have inverted more than a hundred people to the wedding, but this had been one thing that he had deferred to Julia. Julia had insisted on a small wedding. They did not need pomp and ceremony to prove that they loved each other, and she only wanted family there as witnesses.

Maximilian accompanied Julia to the front of the church and offered her to Neville. He then took his seat beside Maria, who looked ravishing in her red dress. He took her hand, and they sat shoulder to shoulder. Sophia sat next to them. Julia did not know what to think of the empty seat beside Sophia, nor of her wish to wait for Walter to be released from incarceration, but she would not meddle, only support.

The vows were read to each other from the Book of Common Prayer, and rings were exchanged. The service was so short that Julia was surprised when it was all over. She soon lost that surprise when she got to kiss her husband. She could not believe that she was now married to a Duke. His lips were warm and tender, and she knew that she had found a love like no other.

The clergyman took them after to enter the marriage lines into the register book, Sophia and Maximilian witnessing the marriage. When they were written and signed, it was official, and Neville kissed her again. She had a family again, and that gave her a feeling that she had not felt in a long time. It filled her with so much joy and excitement that she felt as if she were going to burst.

"I do believe that I am hungry," stated Julia when all was said and done.

"They are preparing a breakfast feast for us back at the castle," said Neville.

The ride back took them over the same flower-covered road, but everything looked different. Perhaps it just felt different. As the castle loomed in the distance, Julia could not believe that this was her new home. The house would be passed on to Maximilian, and he would start his new family there with Maria once they were married, which was planned to happen soon. Julia took another look at the castle. This was her home, and she was now a duchess. Both of those facts would take a long time to sink in.

"We took the long way round," said Julia.

"No, this is a direct path from the church to the castle," said Neville.

"I do not mean that, my love, I mean how we came to be together. We did not take the conventional path by any means, but it has made us stronger. Sometimes I wish that the events of the past months did not happen, but then I might not have you, and our children might not be on the path that they are now on. Do you believe that everything happens for a reason, Neville?"

"If you had asked me that a few months ago, I would have said no, but now I am not so sure. A lot has happened, and I do not believe that my life would be as wonderful as it is if it had not happened exactly as it has. I do not know if everything does happen for a reason, but I am more open to it. Either way, I am so happy to have you as my wife."

"I did not think that I would find love again, Neville." She took the Duke's hand. "And I know that you thought the same. We have found each other at last, and that is a beautiful thing. We have learned how to love again, not just each other, but our children too. We have both grown."

“And I hope that we both grow together some more,” added Neville.

Julia lay her head against Neville’s shoulder, keeping it there until they reached the castle. The ceremony might have been a modest affair, but the breakfast was not. Neville had wanted to invite everyone that they knew, and Julia had been happy with that idea. As they were led into the great hall, she could not keep the smile from her face, but that was soon wiped as they were introduced.

“For the first time, the Duke and Duchess of Edinbran!” came the call.

Julia stopped in her tracks, her face turning red. She did not think that she would ever get used to being called that. She quickly gathered herself, and she and Neville continued on to the head table, sitting there with Sophia, Maximilian, Maria, and a few other close friends.

Different breads, rolls, and pastries were served, with at least a dozen jams, jellies, conserves, and preserves. Eggs, ham, boar, and tongue were warmed and could be smelled throughout the large hall. When they were starting the feast, the help brought out flagons of hot chocolate, pouring cups for each of the guests, with especially large ones for the bride and groom. Near the end of the meal, the large wedding cake was brought out and placed on the center of the table, accompanied by a round of applause. The large fruitcake had been soaked in brandy for at least a month.

Neville and Julia rose to cut the cake, and Maximilian quickly joined them. “Mother, Your Grace, before you do, I have a present for you, or Maria does. She has composed a song for the two of you.”

“That is wonderful,” said Julia, looking across at Maria and beckoning her to come and join them. She hugged Maria when she arrived by the cake. “We do not have a piano here,” said Julia. “Shall we request some musicians?”

“Do not worry,” said Maria. “I do not need the music. I have composed a love song for you and His Grace. I usually sing in Italian, but I wrote this one in English, especially for this union.”



“That is very thoughtful,” said Neville. “Please, will you sing for us now?”

Maria cleared her throat and looked out at the gathered crowd, all eager to hear the song.

*A beating heart. A beating heart, silent until another can hear it.*

*A stillness on your lips. Waiting for another to kiss.*

*The breeze in the trees, a whisper for only you and me.*

*The breaking of the dawn, the same for you and me.*

As she sang, she constantly cast her gaze at Maximilian. Julia knew that this woman would make a fine wife for her son. She was a woman so full of life and love. From the very first time that Maximilian had taken her to see Maria sing, she knew that it was a perfect match.

*A bird flaps its wings. Sailing on the currents our love brings.*

*A woman sings. Singing just for me and just for you.*

*A wave crashes, washing over the shore.*

*And the stars twinkle in the sky, each one my love for you.*

Neville stood holding Julia’s hand, and when the song sounded like it was coming to an end, he guided her around to the table, and the two of them cut into the fruit cake together. When Maria finished her song, there was a loud round of applause. He took the opportunity to pull her in close and kiss her again, bringing more cheers and applause to the room.

“I cannot stand it anymore,” whispered Neville into Julia’s ear.

“What do you mean? Is everything not perfect, my love?”

“It is more than perfect, but I do not want to share you with everyone else anymore. I want you all to myself. I am going to distract them, and then we are going to make our escape. Once we do, I am going to make you all mine.”

*The End?*

## Extended Epilogue

Eager to know more on how **Julia and Neville's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple.

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link:  
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But before you go, turn the page for an extra sweet treat from me...

## Preview: Rescuing his Virgin Duchess

## Prologue

*The District of Murward, Near London, England, 1810*

“*T*he Baron of Calber, accompanied by his gracious daughter Miss Emma Adams,” the master of ceremonies said, reading the names from the card.

They were awfully late arriving at the ball held at Murward Park. Only a few heads turned in their direction, seeing as the dance had already begun. The soft violin sound echoed throughout the place, reaching her ears and adding to her already tensed nerves.

“Go on then, Emma, step forward,” her father hissed. Emma reluctantly stepped into the room, feeling terribly nervous. It was her debut, after all.

The invitation to the ball had come from Lady Celia Murward herself, a friend of Emma’s father, requesting the pleasure of their company and intimating that the evening could serve as an opportune moment for Emma to be presented to the ton.

Since the death of Emma’s mother just eight years prior, Lady Murward had taken it on herself to act in her stead and keep an eye on Emma. She hurried over to greet them, exclaiming at the beautiful dress she had chosen for Emma to wear and had sent from her London modiste. It was a long, silver one, far too extravagant for the occasion, with feathers decorating her hair.

“Emma, you look splendid,” she exclaimed.

Lady Murward was a widow, her husband having been far older than she when they married, and without children of her own, she had little to do but involve herself in the affairs of others, Emma being a

prime choice for her interests.

“Thank you, Lady Murward. I quite like it,” Emma said, suddenly feeling terribly shy.

Emma preferred the company of horses or the pianoforte far more than the ton. Her life had been stigmatized by solitude, with only her governess to keep her comfort, seeing as her father was often away on business. He had always wished for a son, so she was a mere disappointment in his eyes.

The Baron of Calber had no male heir, and in this, he considered himself lacking. He had never shied away from reminding Emma of his dissatisfaction, and the two had never been close, drifting further and further apart as the years went by.

“Oh, I am glad. Your mother would have wanted you to look the part for your debut, would she not, Winston?” Lady Murward said, addressing Emma’s father.

“What? Oh, yes, I am sure she would,” the Baron replied, and Lady Murward beamed.

“We shall have you dancing in no time, Emma. There are countless eligible gentlemen here tonight. I shall introduce you to them all,” she said, taking Emma by the hand.

There were perhaps forty or fifty people already milling about the ballroom. Murward Park was a most spectacular house, built in the neo-classical style, with two wings jutting out from a central colonnaded portico. The ballroom lay at its center, its rear windows looking over the gardens, with doors opening out onto a terrace beyond. As a child, Emma had often taken tea there with Lady Murward, where she would sit formally in the drawing room and be talked down to – seen and never heard. But this was different.

“I cannot dance,” she said, but Lady Murward laughed.

“Do not be silly, Emma. Did we not practice these months past?” she said, and Emma nodded.

Lady Murward had insisted they practice, but Emma was by no means a natural.

“But I was not entirely graceful,” Emma said, glancing shyly at the groups of gentlemen around the room. They were all staring at her.

“But they are showing an interest in you, already,” Lady Murward said, smiling at the gentlemen as further heads were turned.

Emma was a pretty woman, slender, with long blonde hair hidden under her elaborate hairdo. The only jewelry she allowed to touch her skin was her mother’s, as it was a beacon of luck for her.

“Am I to speak with them?” she asked, wondering what she could possibly say to such men.

“Remember what I taught you,” Lady Murward replied, “it is *they* who must speak to you. Come now, I shall make an introduction.”

Her heart beat against her chest as she glanced back at her father, who was staring with disapproval. She *had* to make a good impression, or else everything would be tarnished.

*“This is my chance to make something of you,” he had told her.*

“Good evening,” a young man said, stepping forward and bowing.

He was dressed in the uniform of the militia, an officer, decorated with several medals. A lustful look resided deep in his eyes, and his tousled blonde hair swept over his forehead, his hand now extended.

“Ah, Lieutenant Bowles, may I introduce Miss Emma Adams, daughter of the Baron of Calber,” Lady Murward said.

Emma offered the gentleman her hand, and he raised it to his thin lips, his touch lingering just a moment too long. She blushed.

“A pleasure, a true pleasure, My Lady. Samson Bowles, King’s militia,” he said, still fixing on her with his lustful eyes.

“Is it true this is your debut, My Lady?”

Emma nodded reluctantly, afraid of saying the wrong thing.

“How delightful. Then may I be the first to mark your dance card?” he said, raising his eyebrows, a smile creeping over his face.

“You might, sir,” Emma said, trying desperately to think of a way to

extract herself from the lascivious lieutenant's advances.

The lieutenant offered Emma his arm, and she had no choice but to take it, praying she would not embarrass herself in front of the other guests.

"Shall we?" he said, and Emma had no other choice but to follow.

The music was a waltz, and together they danced, Emma placing all her concentration on where her feet were going, the lieutenant's hand placed firmly about her waist.

"And I am the first to have your hand this night?" he asked, clearly enjoying the thought of her innocence.

"You are, sir," she said, blushing, his grip tightening on her.

"You dance well for one so young," he said, and Emma forced a smile.

"Thank you, sir," she said, and the lieutenant smiled.

"And when the dance is over, we shall step out onto the terrace. The gardens here are very private. We might walk amongst the roses," he said, and Emma's heart skipped a beat.

She had heard tell of such men, men who would offer compliments and attention when their mind was on one thing, and one thing only. She had no intention of allowing the lascivious lieutenant to be the first to plant a kiss on her lips and made protest immediately.

"I am really rather warm. I should like to take a moment for some refreshment," she said as the dance approached an end.

"Very well, I shall be waiting," he said, stepping back and bowing to her.

Emma was grateful for her quick thinking, though she felt like an animal caught in a trap. Everywhere she looked, gentlemen's heads were turning to look at her, and she knew it was only a matter of time before another stepped forward to introduce himself. She glanced desperately around, breathing a sigh of relief as she spotted Lydia Ayer in the far corner of the room.

Emma had few friends in the district, but Lydia Ayer was perhaps the



closest she could count on. She was the daughter of Lord and Lady Ayer and resided at Lockington Manor, a short carriage drive away from Emma's own home at Calber Manor. Emma made straight for her, ignoring the looks of the gentleman she passed and greeting her friend with the enthusiasm of one whose day had just been saved.

"Oh, thank goodness, Lydia, I am so very pleased to see you," Emma said, smiling at Lydia, who appeared somewhat surprised.

"Emma, I have not seen you for weeks. It is nice to see you too," Lydia said, smiling at Emma, who glanced nervously over her shoulder, relieved to see that Lieutenant Bowles had already attached himself to another poor victim.

"I have been here at Murward Park preparing for this evening," Emma replied.

"Ah, your debut, of course. How delightful for you," Lydia said, and Emma again forced her face into a smile.

"It is... an experience," she said, and Lydia laughed.

"To the gentlemen gathered here, the announcement of a debut is a cause for some excitement. You have stepped into that void, Emma," she said, and Emma giggled nervously.

Lydia was a year older than Emma, and her debut had been, by all accounts, a success. She had a suitor, a man named Reginald Parks, and she was no longer part of that eligible set she spoke of.

"It is the way they all look at me," Emma said, scanning around the room as several gentlemen raised their glasses to her.

"But of course, they will. You are a beautiful, single woman," Lydia replied.

Emma was not ready for such an assault of interest.

"And am I to dance with them all?" she exclaimed.

"No, of course you are not. Only the ones you wish to, though it is not always easy to resist the advances of a gentleman's intent," she said, smiling at Emma, who felt her hopes diminishing.

It seemed inevitable she would spend the evening fighting off gentlemanly attentions.

“And if I wish to dance with none of them?” she asked as Lydia raised her eyebrows.

“Then why are you here?” she said and walked off toward the refreshment table.

It was as though Lydia had been the guard at the entrance to a treasure house; for the moment Emma was left alone, three gentlemen immediately pounced on her, introducing themselves simultaneously, vying for her attention.

“Cyril Jones... Miss...?”

“My name is Lord Jeffrey Ardlington, it is my pleasure...”

“Loftus Kirk, and might I ask your name...?”

Emma looked at the three of them in astonishment, entirely overwhelmed by the attention, and being unable to think of anything meaningful to say, she fled, excusing herself to the powder room, just as the next dance struck up.

\* \* \*

“You certainly made an impression tonight, Emma,” her father said as they rode home in the carriage. The carriage shook with the wind, but she paid no mind to it.

The ball had lasted all night, and the dancing only stopped once they were left famished. Emma had been unable to resist the advances of several handsome men who were rather insistent on joining her on the dance floor. That included Lieutenant Bowles.

“I did not expect it,” she confessed, surprised at her father’s tone of voice.

He rarely showed any interest in her.

“Because you are an attractive proposition, Emma. You are young, attractive, and with excellent prospects. I am sure any man of good

fortune and high standing would be pleased to call you his own,” he replied.

It was late, the moon high in the sky, the interior of the carriage dark and gloomy, and Emma struggled to see the expression on her father’s face. These words were not what she expected to hear from him.

“I was not entirely keen on those whose attention I attracted,” she added, thinking back to the lascivious lieutenant.

“Ah, but they matter not, Emma. What matters is the one, single man whom you do approve of. I was talking to one such gentleman, and he intends to call on you tomorrow,” he said.

“But why did he not introduce himself?” she asked as her father chuckled.

“He told me he would prefer a private introduction. He is a man of considerable means, one whom you would do well to court the favor of. Yes, he will call on you tomorrow, and that will be most acceptable,” he replied.

Emma sighed. She hoped the gentleman in question would not be like Lieutenant Bowles or any of the other men at the ball for whom conquest, rather than romance, seemed to be their intentions. She had barely stepped out into society, and already she had her doubts as to the pleasures it could afford her. She had tasted the advances of men and found them somewhat lacking.

“And will I like him?” she asked. Her father tutted.

“He will like you, I am sure, and that is all that matters,” he replied, and that was the end of that.

But Emma could not look forward to the following day, not if it meant an encounter with a man she had no wish, nor desire, to acquaint herself with further. She felt trapped in obligation, her debut a movement from the familiar to the unknown. Courtship, betrothal, marriage – these were all things she had considered, things she desired, but only in their right and proper time. Emma intended to marry for love and no other reason, and she was not convinced that any man her father favored could be favored equally by herself.

“And my feelings count for nothing?” she asked as the carriage drew up outside Calber Manor.

“If I had my choice, it would have been a son I was seeing married,” he replied, clambering out of the carriage and leaving Emma sitting alone in the dark, tears rising in her eyes.

“Then I suppose I must make the best of things,” she whispered to herself, knowing that whatever the following day brought, it would not be the happiness she longed for.

## Chapter 1

“*T*he Earl of Darney to see you, ma’am,” the maid said, curtseying, as Emma sighed and rose from the pianoforte.

She had been busy practicing a new piece that morning, and the interruption was somewhat unwelcome, given she knew what was to come. Percy Harlow, The Earl of Darney, was a persistent presence in her life and had been ever since the morning after her debut when he had called at Calber Manor to make his introductions.

“You may show him in, Rose,” Emma said, nodding to the maid, who curtsied and hurried from the room.

It was a beautiful, late spring day, and the doors from the drawing room were open to the garden. A delightful scent was wafting into the room, roses and lavender, the breeze warm. Emma smoothed down her dress, glancing at her reflection in the mirror over the fireplace. She was nineteen now and had largely absented herself from society in the months following her debut. There had been no end of suitors presented to her, but she had preferred to withdraw into solitude, much to her father’s disapproval. A moment later, Rose returned, and behind her came the Earl himself, a tall gentleman, far older than Emma, wearing a wig, and dressed in a long blue frock coat and breeches, a yellow cravat at his neck.

As her father had intimated on their first introductions, he was a man of considerable success, at least in monetary terms. He ran a successful shipping business between London and the colonies and had mercantile interests in Europe and beyond. His wealth was considerable – valued at some twenty thousand a year, and he possessed estates in Derbyshire, Hampshire, and Kent, as well as a townhouse in London from which he had just arrived.

“Emma, how pleased I am to see you,” he said, bowing to her with a

smile, "it has felt like an age since I was last in your company."

In truth, it had been but a week since the Earl had last graced the drawing room, and he had called in the intervening period, though Emma had hidden in the library and instructed Rose to tell the Earl she was not at home.

"It does feel that way," Emma said, gritting her teeth.

The Earl was a pleasant enough man, and there could be no doubting the sincerity of his intentions. But his persistence was unattractive, and Emma had long since grown tired of his constant attention. He seemed assured of his right to possess her, and she knew he had come to her this day with intent in his heart.

"The Earl of Darney is an excellent match for you," her father had told her, enthusing over the Earl's qualities, even though he had little actual knowledge of the man's character.

The Earl was rich, possessed of a fortune which Emma's father believed himself worthy of a share in, and he was willing to use Emma as a bargaining chip in its acquisition. He had made no secret of the fact, his interest in his daughter's marriage was purely monetary and for personal gain.

"And my own opinion of him does not count?" she had asked, and her father had waved his hand dismissively.

"I never wanted a daughter, but now I have one; I must see to it she is married. Is that not the duty of a father?" he had snapped back at her.

Emma could not question his intentions, for they were that of any conscientious father, though she knew them to be entirely self-serving. Her marriage would benefit her father, and thus she had no choice in the matter of who it was she married.

"But how glad I am to be here now," the Earl continued, sitting down in a chair by the fireplace and smiling at Emma, who forced her face into a smile and sat down opposite him.

"I was just practicing the pianoforte," she said, in the vague hope he might apologize for interrupting her and return at a later date.

But the Earl did not seem aware of the inconvenience he had caused and merely smiled at her, exclaiming his delight in some of her previous recitals.

"I do love to hear you play the pianoforte, Emma. It is music to my ears," he said, and she had to prevent herself from laughing at the ridiculous obviousness of his words.

"It is music, my Lord, very definitely," she said.

"But it is not music I have come to speak of," he said, clearing his throat.

Emma stiffened, knowing the inevitability of what was to come. There had been no formal courtship between them, for Emma had attracted the attention of a considerable number of gentlemen in the district, who, although knowing her to be a recluse, had persisted in their attempts to garner her affections. But none had been as persistent as the Earl of Darney, and in the months past, the others had trailed away as fresh opportunity presented itself, leaving only the Earl as a possible suitor.

"Some tea, perhaps?" she asked, hoping to prolong the inevitable for as long as possible.

"Perhaps later, Emma. No, I have come on a most urgent matter, and after considerable discussion with your father. I had hoped you and I might meet sooner than we have, for our previous recent encounters have been somewhat rushed or have not afforded us these moments alone," he said, looking imploringly at her, his nerves visibly rising.

"Lady Murward's salon is hardly the place for intimate discussions," Emma said, and the Earl nodded.

"I find conversation there somewhat stilted, and there have been matters... well, of great importance, that have kept me from you. That is why I am so pleased to find you here this morning. Your father told me you would be," he said, smiling nervously at her.

Emma knew her father had a hand in this. He had arranged the whole thing and without any thought to her own feelings in the matter. Ever since her debut at Murward Park, it had been her father's intention to



see her married to the Earl of Darney. He was the man who had introduced himself to her father that evening and made clear his interest in Emma before calling the next day in the hopes of making an impression.

Indeed, an impression had been made, but it was not the one he had hoped. Emma found the Earl something of a bore, his conversation stilted and awkward. They shared no interests – though the Earl feigned his delight in her playing of the pianoforte – and had little in common save their position in society. It was an entirely mismatched arrangement, and though Emma knew what was now to come, she had no intention of accepting it.

“I am sure he did,” Emma said, angry at the thought of her father playing such games.

He had spent so long being absent from his fatherly duties that the manner in which he now behaved was quite out of keeping with his previous demeanor. Emma knew he had always wanted a son, and he blamed her for not being that son and her poor mother for not providing one. Theirs had been a loveless marriage, and Emma had felt so sorry for her mother in life, a woman who had tried only to please the husband who so rejected her.

“Because I had to see you, Emma. I had to speak to you. We have waited long enough for this moment,” he said, his hands clenched, his brow growing sweaty.

“To be alone?” she asked, wishing there was some way of extracting herself from his intentions.

“Yes, but for the moment we both know to be ours,” he said, and now he almost fell from the chair, stumbling forward in an awkward show of falling to one knee.

Emma startled, recoiling, as he reached up and took her by the hand.

“My Lord, I am...” she began, but he interrupted her.

“Please, no words until I have spoken what is in my heart, Emma. Since the moment I first set eyes on you at your debut, I have thought of these words. I cannot contain them any longer. You have had other

suitors, as befits a woman of such beauty as yourself, but I hope it is I who has captured your heart,” he said, his voice trembling.

Emma had always been taught by her mother – and a string of governesses – to be polite and well-mannered. She was naturally quiet and reserved, preferring her own company to that of others. But she had a determination to her, one instilled in her by her mother, who had always made the best of things and taught Emma to be firm in what she wanted.

“But, my Lord...” Emma began, not wishing to upset the Earl, having no intention of giving into his proposal.

“Marry me, Emma; that is all I ask. It is what I wish for more than anything in the world. You and I were destined for one another, of that I am certain. Had I not been invited to the ball that evening, had it not been your debut, we might not have met, but we did, and how happy that has made me,” he said.

Emma did not think it that much of a coincidence that they had met at Lady Murward’s ball. The entire district had been invited and, being far enough from London that such events were by no means a regular occurrence, anyone who was anyone in a radius of some ten or twenty miles had been in attendance.

“Goodness,” she said, trying to sound surprised, “I had not expected a proposal to come so suddenly.”

He looked at her with a puzzled expression. The proposal could hardly be called sudden, made as it was some eighteen months after they had first met.

“Suddenly?” he said, looking up at her in confusion.

“I mean... I had not expected you to make such a proposal today,” she said, blushing under his gaze.

“Ah, I see. You thought perhaps I would have invited you for a walk or to sit by the river. No, Emma, I could hardly contain myself, and I have already spoken with your father, who thinks such a match to be the very best possible hope for you. One must have the permission of a woman’s father,” he said, and Emma smiled through gritted teeth.

"I believe I must have a little time to think this over," she said, unwilling to offer any answer in the immediacy of such a passionate outburst.

"But do you not wish for it? If there is hesitation on your part, then I must know why," he said, and Emma shook her head.

"I must have time to speak to my father, to learn his opinion on the matter," she said, and the Earl shook his head.

"But he is entirely in agreement and thinks it to be the most excellent of matches. There can be no doubt we are meant to be as one, and we can be married in the swiftest of time. I will have no trouble obtaining a special license from the Bishop, a close and personal friend of mine. We could be married by the first day of summer," he said, looking longingly up at her, his eyes wide and imploring.

The first day of summer was but a matter of weeks away, and the thought of such a swift doom was enough to make Emma feel ill.

"Please, my Lord, allow me some time to think. I am not refusing, I simply must consider this... extraordinary offer," she said as he sighed.

"Yes, forgive me. There is much here to consider. I have made my intentions clear, however, and I will say again that I am in love with you, Emma, and wish only for you to be my wife. I will return tomorrow afternoon to hear your answer. But in the meantime, know that I shall be in the very throes of turmoil awaiting your response," he said, rising from his knees and bowing to her.

Emma rose and curtsied, and there was an awkward pause, the Earl then taking his leave, reminding her again of his most profound admiration for her. When the door closed behind him, Emma sank back down in her chair and sighed. She had no intention of saying yes and had bought herself only the matter of a day to think of some way in which to extract herself from this arrangement. She barely had time to think before the door flew open and her father appeared, red-faced and angry.

"Why did you not accept?" he demanded, and Emma folded her arms and scowled at him.

“I did not say no, either. But I was not about to agree to something so immediately without due consideration. How dare you promise my hand to a man I have no desire to marry,” she said, as her father banged his fist down on the lid of the pianoforte.

“The Earl of Darney is hardly a stranger to you. He has been a suitor ever since your debut. He is a man of good character and fortune. What is there you object to about him?” he demanded.

“That I am not in love with him,” she said. Her father shook his head.

“Love? What has love to do with it? Do all marriages begin in love? Your mother and I...” he began, but Emma interrupted him.

“Mother loved you, but you did not love her. You blamed her for not giving you an heir, and you have blamed me all my life for not being that heir. I will not be talked down to about love from a man whose own marriage was loveless,” she exclaimed.

“You will marry the Earl, and that is the end of it,” her father replied, but Emma would not hear of it.

His words made her all the more determined not to marry the Earl, a man for whom she could summon nothing but common courtesy for and for whom there could be no possibility of love – not now, not ever.

“I will not marry him, father, and when he calls tomorrow, I shall tell him as much,” she replied.

Her father scowled at her, stepping forward and lowering his voice in a menacing tone.

“You shall marry him, Emma, and that is final,” he replied before turning on his heels and marching from the room.

But Emma, quiet and well-mannered as she was, had no intention of marrying the Earl of Darney. Now, with the strength of that conviction in her heart, she vowed to find a way to extract herself from what seemed an inevitability, one which was soon to close in on her, bringing with it terrible and unforeseeable consequences.

## Chapter 2

“*H*urry Rose, I must leave before my father returns,” Emma said, hurriedly stuffing clothes into a small bag, listening for the sounds of her father’s horse returning from his evening ride.

“Please, ma’am, must you leave like this? Can you not wait?” the maid asked, tears welling up in her eyes.

But Emma shook her head, taking the maid by the hand.

“You have been my only friend in this house, Rose, but I cannot stay, not now. My father is adamant I shall marry the Earl of Darney, and he wants his answer tomorrow. What else can I say but yes, even when my heart is so set against such a terrible fate? Now please, we must exchange clothes. I must not look like one of my rank and class if I am to be convincing in my flight,” she exclaimed as Rose began to sob.

“Surely there must be a way. Are there not other suitors? Another man who could save you from this terrible fate?” she exclaimed, but Emma shook her head.

“Not by tomorrow afternoon. I had foolishly imagined my father’s charity in the matter or that there would be another man, one whom I, myself, found attractive, a man I could fall in love with. It is not that I dislike the Earl of Darney, but I do not love him, and I will not be forced into such unhappiness, not for my father’s sake, not for anybody’s sake,” she said, snatching up a few odd pieces of jewelry, and the locket containing her mother’s picture, a gift on her deathbed.

“But where will you go, ma’am? It is a dangerous world out there, and what will become of you?” Rose asked, handing Emma one of her dresses to change into.

It was true that Emma had thought little as to what would come next. She had made the decision to leave following the impassioned argument with her father, knowing there could be no persuading him to alter his intention to see her married to the Earl of Darney. He was unwavering in his conviction, and she was unwavering in hers – stubbornness being a trait each shared for better or worse.

Now, she intended to leave Calber Manor behind and make her own way in the world, away from the expectations of her father. She would make her way to London, imploring charity and fortune to see her well. It was hardly a carefully considered plan, but Emma felt she had no choice. She could either take her chances in the world or face the certainty of misery at the hands of her father and the Earl of Darney.

“I shall take a horse from the stables. My father will not know I am gone until the morning, for he has never had any wish to dine with me. You will not be implicated, Rose, for you shall say you knew nothing of it. I have my jewelry and a little money from my allowance. I will find a place to stay, and perhaps I will take a position as a governess,” she said, for the thought of doing so had its attractions.

Emma knew she would not miss her father nor her life in the district of Murward, which now felt more like a prison than a home. But Rose seemed doubtful, and while Emma knew her words sounded naïve, she was determined not to give in to her father’s demands.

“Please, ma’am, just consider what you are doing. You shall lose everything, and all your finery, your possessions, your position. None of it will mean anything if you leave,” Rose said as Emma took up the bag with a determined look on her face.

“But I shall have my freedom, Rose, and that is worth far more,” she said, glancing around her chambers one last time.

The decision to leave had been hurried, but the thought was by no means new. She had often imagined what her life might be like, away from the rigid expectations of society. Lady Murward had been as forceful as her father in her expectation of Emma marrying, and if it had not been her father who forced the issue, then their neighbor would undoubtedly have done so.

“You must marry, Emma; you simply must. It is all you should hope for,” Lady Murward had told her.

But Emma was not about to have her life decided for her. She was yet to fall in love, and she knew she could never force herself to do so. Love would find her at the right moment and not before, of that, she was certain, and she kissed Rose on the cheek, thanking her again for her faithful service.

“I will always remember your kindness, Rose, and I promise we shall see one another again,” she said, opening the door to her chambers cautiously and peering out.

Her father liked to take a ride before dinner and had set off earlier that evening to ride across his estate. Emma would take a horse and ride into the village, taking the London road, hoping no one would see her. It was a risk, but one that was worth taking for the freedom she would finally enjoy. The Earl of Darney would be terribly upset, but Emma could summon little guilt for her flight, given he had never once sought her true opinion on the proposal, expecting rather than seducing.

“You must go out by the side door, ma’am, not through the hallway. Mr. Collingwood is polishing your father’s shoes, and he will take great delight in telling him of your deception,” Rose said, leading Emma down the servant’s stairs and into the pantry.

The other servants were taking their evening meal before the return of their master. Emma’s father prided himself on punctuality and demanded the same from his servants. Dinner was always served at eight o’clock, whether in summer or winter, Emma’s father making a show of his personal wealth by burning candles long into the night.

“I have everything I need,” Emma said as Rose thrust a bundle containing bread, cheese, and apples into her hands.

“If you are ever at a loss, call at the servant’s door of a great house, ma’am. There is often charity there for travelers,” Rose said, and Emma smiled.

“I shall do so, but I hope it will not come to that. I shall live on my wits,” she said, and without further delay, she slipped out of the side

door and hurried to the stables, where she found several of her father's horses tethered up.

But knowing he would miss even one that was not in its place when he returned, Emma took a horse belonging to one of the servants, hoping that her father would show charity by recompensing the man to whom the beast belonged. It was a young black horse with a white dot on its forehead. A pleasant animal who whinnied and stomped his foot as Emma hastily saddled him, stroking his mane and whispering in his ear.

"You shall carry me to London," she said, untethering the horse and leading him out into the stable yard.

There was no one else around, the stable boy being inside with the others servants, and with a final glance at Calber Manor, the only home she had ever known, Emma climbed onto the horse and urged it quickly out of the stable yard, taking a circuitous route behind the house and across the heath toward the village. There could be no turning back now, and as she rode away, a tear ran down her cheek that it had come to this, everything she had known now left behind, and only the uncertain lying ahead.

\* \* \*

Emma was tired. She had ridden long into the night, taking the road toward London from the village until she passed the thirty-mile milestone. It was dark by then, the moon high in the sky, and though it had been a warm day, there was a chill in the air; Emma had wrapped her shawl tightly around her shoulders.

It had all seemed so simple at first, she would leave Calber Manor behind, and in doing so, she would also leave her problems behind – the Earl of Darney, societal expectations, the duty of marriage to a man she did not love. But while all that was the case, she had no real notion of what lay ahead or of what she would do now she had escaped.

She startled at the sound of an owl overhead, its majestic white figure gliding through the air above her, its screech echoing through the



trees. She was riding through the lonely country, and she knew it would not do for a woman to be out alone at night on such a remote stretch of road. She had heard stories of robbers and bandits on the roads, outlaws who would hold up the mail wagons or force wealthy travelers to divest of their possessions.

Up ahead, she could see the outline of buildings, a farm perhaps, and she slowed the horse to a trot, peering through the gloom. There were no lights burning in the windows of the farmhouse up ahead, and a small copse of trees to her left would provide shelter for the horse while she sought refuge in one of the barns. If she rose early the next morning, no one would ever know she had been there.

“You stay here tonight,” she whispered, patting the horse’s mane as she tethered it to a tree.

The horse whinnied and stomped its foot, though it too seemed glad of the rest. Emma looked around her, and as certain as she could be in the dark that she was not being watched, she hurried toward the nearest barn. It was filled with bales of hay, and she clambered up a ladder onto a parapet, burrowing down into the straw so that she was quite snug if somewhat disheveled, pleased to have made her escape.

She could only imagine what her father would say the next morning when he discovered she was gone. Would he send out a search party for her, she wondered? He would not be happy that she was gone, but there would be little he could do to bring her back. Emma had no intention of returning home, not until the matter was settled. She would write to her father from London, explaining the reason for her flight, and perhaps then he would understand she was earnest in her desire to marry for love rather than duty.

It did not take long for her to fall asleep, having eaten an apple and piece of cheese to stave off the hunger rising in her stomach. But the hay was soft and warm, and soon her thoughts had turned to dreams, imagining herself far away from her troubles, finally permitting the happiness she knew should be hers.

“Fetch me three bales, there are the sheep to feed, too,” came a voice from below.

Emma awoke with a start, the sun shining through a gap in the barn roof, and she sat up in a panic, listening to the voices of two men below.

“I’ll bring four out, father, just in case, the animals have been hungry lately with the dry weather,” came the response, and Emma peered fearfully over the parapet, on which she had been sleeping, to see a man – a boy of no more than eighteen – standing below.

“I will get the cart,” a call came from outside.

The boy began to hum to himself. He was handsome and well-built, strong, too, for he lifted the bales of hay single-handedly, heaving one onto his shoulder, before returning to the next. Emma held her breath. If he came up the ladder, then she was sure to be discovered, and she scolded herself for sleeping late, wondering whether the horse had been discovered hidden in the copse.

“Now then, which was the first we laid down, old straw always first, that is what father said,” the boy pondered, and to Emma’s horror, he mounted the ladder to climb onto the parapet.

She squirmed back, trying to bury herself in the straw. But it was no use, and as his head popped above the parapet, he let out an exclamation of the utmost surprise.

“Well now, what do we have here then?” he asked, grinning at her.

“Please, do not say anything. I mean no harm. I was... lost, you see, and took refuge here for the night. I have only slept amongst the straw, I have taken nothing, I have...” she began, convinced he would call his father at once and have her hauled before the magistrate.

“Wait now, you do not look the sort who would sleep in a barn for the night,” he said, climbing up onto the parapet and looking her up and down.

Despite wearing Rose’s dress, Emma knew her looks remained that of a woman of high rank and class. Her hair was combed and tied into a French bun, her skin was soft and smooth, her hands delicate, and

without the look of one who had worked hard at any point in their life. She blushed, emerging from the straw, a pleading look on her face.

“Please, I am running away,” she said, for there was something about the boy which made her feel as though she could trust him.

“Is that so? From where?” he asked, his head cocked to one side, and in a few brief words, Emma explained what and who it was she was running from.

The boy gazed at her in wide-eyed astonishment, just as a shout came from below.

“Where are you, boy? Bring those bales out,” his father called out.

“Wait here, I will help you,” he said, and before Emma could reply, his head disappeared down the ladder, and he was calling out in response to his father.

Emma sighed. She had wanted to ride swiftly away that morning, to be well on the way to London before her father realized she was gone. At most, she was only ten miles or so from Calber Manor and still in danger of discovery. But there was nothing she could do but wait, trusting in a boy she did not know, praying her secret would not be discovered. It was all a great and terrible risk. She had gone from everything to nothing, and now all that stood between her and discovery was a bemused farmhand, and the ladder of a hay barn...

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## About the Author

Having obtained a degree in Journalism, but with an affinity for literature and creative writing, **Olivia T. Bennet** knew from a young age that her future lay in the romantic ideals of the past. With a fascination for the Regency era and a good romance, she started her career as a historical romance author the old-fashioned way: with pen and paper.

Born in rural Devon, Olivia draws inspiration from the vast farmlands of the British countryside and the people living in the surrounding villages. An avid artist, she takes her sketchbook everywhere with her and captures the beauty of nature, which she then incorporates into her books.

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